


1997

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Recommended Citation

Rawlings, Hunter R. III (1997) "Walking Thoughts," *The Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science: JIAS*: Vol. 104: No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.uni.edu/jias/vol104/iss2/3>

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WALKING THOUGHTS¹

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I've borrowed my title from a poem by Marvin Bell, a member of our Writers' Workshop, because I cannot think of state parks without thinking of my love for their hiking trails and the expansion of spirit they have brought me. State parks are more than nature preserves, more than recreational areas, though these functions are very important. They are also cultural and even spiritual resources, centers of emotional and psychic renewal.

Our park system is a great resource for the state and its people for many reasons. But I want to focus on the one I know best: the park as encourager of "Walking Thoughts." Because this is a celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Iowa State Parks system, held in conjunction with the Iowa Academy of Science, you are probably well aware of the linkage I want to establish between walking and thinking. But a few examples, nevertheless: Consider the itinerant sages of China and India, the Peripatetic philosophers of ancient Athens, generations of English scholars strolling along the Cambridge "backs" and down "Addison's Walk" at Oxford, the Brontë sisters roaming the Yorkshire moors, and Darwin mulling over his findings while pacing the sandy road behind his house.

For similar reasons, our creative writers at Iowa are drawn to paths along the Iowa River, where my wife Elizabeth and I have often run into them on our own rambles with our dog. Not too long ago, I saw our poet Jorie Graham there with her dog; then a few months later read the resulting poem in the *New Yorker*. The English writer A.E. Houseman was another who walked his way into his poems, as he recounts in "The Name and Nature of Poetry":

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon . . . [clearly, he wasn't at a meeting of the Iowa Academy of Science!], I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the process of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line of two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once. . . .

I like to think that one of these was the poem that begins "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough."

The summer before Elizabeth and I came to the University of Iowa, we had a chance to go some walking in France, where our favorite path, a steep and demanding one near the coastline above Nice, turned out to be the same one Nietzsche had used when he was in the throes of writing *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. As Nietzsche later recalled, "When my creative energy flowed most freely, my muscular activity was always greatest"—and after taking that uphill trail of his, I think I have a better idea of the energy that went into his philosophy.

A walk in a park allows us not only to go back to nature, but to go back to our humanity. It gives us an opportunity to compose ourselves, to regain contacts with deeper levels of our being. A park trail invites us to move at a *human* pace, to walk as we think, and think as we walk. This is not a retreat from reality, but a deeper engagement with it: a release, not an escape. By dissolving tensions, the walk deepens and energizes our powers of thought. The mind is set at liberty to play with thoughts, to toss and juggle them, turn them this way and that, and allow them to grow and change. Through these walking thoughts, we forge new connections, refresh and reinvigorate our spirits, and rekindle our powers of imagination. The almost consecrated spaces of our state parks allow us to commune with what is elemental in the natural world, regain our sense of kinship with other forms of life, and rediscover the strength of the primal bonds that connect us with the earth. The park is in this larger sense a place of *re-creation*, to go back to the root meaning of "recreation."

Parks are well known as places of inspiration. This is true, I believe, not only because the scenery is uplifting, but because, in responding to it, *we* are made new. In these surroundings, we look at the world with fresh eyes, as you can tell from the expressive names of our parks: Backbone, Gull Point, Honey Creek, Lake of Three Fires, Ledges, Marble Beach, Nine Eagles, Pilot Knob, Prairie Rose, Red Haw, Steamboat Rock, Wildcat Den—each name, a poem in miniature. Other names remind us that these grounds have been held sacred long before we set them aside as parks: Ahquabi, Keomah, Keosauqua, Manawa, Wapello, Makquoketa, Mini-Wakan, Wapsipincon, Wanata, and some that I'm not sure I can pronounce. Still others recall the land's geological and historical heritage: Geode, Fort Atkinson, Fort Defiance, Lewis and Clark, Mines of Spain, Pioneer.

It seems that Carl Sandburg understood these complex functions of state parks very well. According to Robert Charles Wolf's 1991 guide, *Iowa's State Parks*, Sandburg frequently visited Palisades-Kessler State Park during the 1920's and 1930's. This was a period of his life rich in artistic experimentation and creation, not only in poetry but in collecting native folksongs, writing humorous, mystical tales for children, and preparing *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. In what many consider his master work, "The People, Yes," these memorable lines appear:

Once having marched
Over the margins of animal necessity,
Over the grim line of sheer subsistence
Then man came
To the deeper rituals of his bones,
To the lights lighter than any bones,
To the time for thinking things over,
To the dance, the song, the story,
Or the hours given over to dreaming,
Once having so marched.

¹Presented at the 75th Anniversary of Iowa State Parks. A joint meeting of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and the Iowa Academy of Science. Proceedings of the symposium are available from the Iowa D.N.R.

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I can't prove that Sandburg actually visited Palisade-Kepler and conceived these lines on his walks along the Cedar River bluffs, but he might have. Certainly it is on walks like these that I, myself, have regained a sense of these "deeper rituals of [our] bones."

Pike's Peak State Park, near McGregor, has been to me a revelation. When I lived in Colorado, I thought I knew where Pike's Peak was, but that was before I discovered the original here in Iowa! As you probably know, Zebulon Pike reached *our* peak first, during his 1805 surveying trip, a year before he began exploring what he called the "desolate" territory further west. But Pike's Peak of Iowa is measured not so much in its physical height as in its power to elevate the human spirit. Particularly, of course, I'm thinking of the spot where Ioway scouts first caught sight of Marquette and Jolliet, of Marquette and Jolliet, as we always called them in school, on June 17, 1673. This is the moment captured in the diorama at Iowa Hall in the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History, which I saw several months before I had a chance to visit the park itself. As you may know, the meticulous research for that exhibit on our campus was done on site at Pike's Peak State Park, with the help and cooperation of the state park naturalists, and it's a very good likeness of the real thing.

The moment I saw that diorama, I was seized in a direct, visceral way by the emotions I'd felt as a child growing up in Virginia, reading about the westward expansion. As a ten-year-old, I remember being enthralled by the romance of exploration, the opening of the American continent, and I used to read and re-read the adventures of Ponce de Leon, Hernando de Soto, Lewis and Clark, and especially the French explorers, the hunters and trappers, who captivated my imagination. I pictured them making their way down unknown rivers, over rapids, through swamps, across the plains—venturing into the interior, recording strange flora and fauna, naming landmarks, claiming new territories. I saw the whole process as very mysterious, merging the inquiring spirit of the old European world with the uncharted expanses of the new American West.

Then I saw that diorama, and a shiver went through me. Once again, I felt the whole weight of the American past, but this time, from the opposite perspective, *reversing* the direction of my early school training. And I mean "perspective" very literally. In Iowa Hall, for the first time in my life, instead of identifying with the European adventurers, I saw, in an instant, how they must have looked to the people who already lived here. Standing just behind the Ioway scouts, I saw the trespassing foreigners. For the first time, I could imagine what it must have been like to look down from that bluff high on the west side of the river, looking out from Iowa, the "beautiful land," toward the east, straining to make out the intruders as they entered the Mississippi without warning, and without permission. For me, that was an almost spiritual awakening, striking deep reverberations in my understanding of history.

Several months later, when I finally had a chance to go to Pike's Peak State Park myself, and stand on that bluff in reality, I continued to view the scene through Ioway or Sac and Fox eyes. What was actually visible that day, far down on the river, were tugs, barges, and a few row boats. But in my mind's eye, I could see Marquette and Jolliet, heedless of their unseen observers, paddling their canoes down the Wisconsin, and out into the wide Mississippi, deep into the heart of the continent. Poised on the Indian lookout, near the burial mounds of even earlier Iowans, I watched and waited, and felt in my bones the impending upheaval of cultures.

State parks, where many features of the landscape have hardly changed over the centuries, enable us to contemplate the meaning of historical moments like this one. In the park setting, such moments become not just dates in history books, not just intellectual knowledge, but *lived* experience. As a well-known specialist in ancient history once remarked, the Greeks of the Periclean

age may have *known* less about their past than we know, as a result of our archeological investigations, but they *felt* the past much more directly than we do. For the ancient Greeks, history wasn't book-knowledge. History was vitally present to them through their oral traditions, stories heard many times from their great-grandfathers and -grandmothers about the exploits of their great-great-grandparents. And their knowledge of history was inseparable from their appreciation of nature; they absorbed both, from childhood on, as they walked with their elders in the groves, beside the tombs of their ancestors.

In Iowa, too, we very much need to repair to places which have been set aside for walking and thinking, for being fully present in the immediate moment, and for reconnecting the present with the past. In our state parks, and scarcely anywhere else in Iowa, we can appreciate the comparatively permanent features of a landscape that otherwise changes with economic conditions, going all the way back to the Paleo-Indians who moved in after the glacier receded. Their successors altered the land, built mounds, and used fire to clear spaces for agriculture. But these changes were minor compared to the period of white settlement, when forests were leveled, wetlands drained, and prairie sod broken to be put under the plow. I have read somewhere that Iowa, as we now know it, is 98 percent arable. Almost every inch of the Iowa landscape, as American literature professor Robert Sayre has noted in *Take this Exit*, had been "measured and cultivated, planted and built upon by the men and women who live and have lived on it." And now, for compelling economic reasons of the present, the countryside is changing again: the topsoil is being sold off, the hills graded down, and the farmland paved over, in order to build shopping malls and new housing developments.

Precisely because so much of Iowa has commercial value, either for farming or for development, very little has been left "unimproved," so to speak, meaning that our children have comparatively few opportunities to appreciate the land for its *non-commercial* value. That doesn't mean the state park is, or should be, frozen in time. On the contrary, parks remind us of our complexly textured historical and geological past. Established in different times and for different reasons, each of Iowa's state parks reflects a truth about what Iowa is, and was. Yet as the repository of an enduring and intrinsic value, parkland refuses to be reduced to purely economic terms. How can you put a price on wild asparagus and mushrooms, a Cherokee rose, fireflies in a jar? Despite the period when the state instituted a "user fee," now happily rescinded, our parks have continued to give Iowans an opportunity to *use* the land without *using it up*. To use, in this deeper sense, is to partake of, to experience, to enjoy, without in any way diminishing the resources available to the next user. In our hyper-capitalistic society, the value of public land, open to all for experiential rather than commercial use, is truly beyond price.

The park is where nature and culture meet, and each can enrich the other. I'm speaking to some extent about parks in general, but I have in mind Iowa state parks in particular, where our particular form of culture is so closely linked to our topography. As the historian Laurence Lafore has written, "The State of Iowa is not a chunk of the Midwest cut out by arbitrary lines from the enormous map of farmland that extends interminably through twelve states. It is a unit of consciousness, and it has a culture of its own." Lafore is correct, and in Iowa, consciousness and landscape are intimately connected. Both are notable for their *absence of extremes*, a *spirit of moderation* that is neither flat nor dull, but gentle and unobtrusive. Paradoxically, the absence of extremes heightens our appreciation for the subtler features of the Iowa landscape. As Lafore observes, "The valleys and hills of Iowa are bigger, and the forest more primeval, for the agricultural geometry that surrounds them. . . [T]he spectrum of diversity is narrow, and so the perception of diversity is

heightened. . . . Low hills seem alpine here. Shallow curves become hairpin turns."

Iowa state parks allow us to appreciate, within this comparatively narrow spectrum of geographical diversity, the delicacy of variations in front of our eyes. Instead of being awestruck by the sublime in nature, the Grand Canyon or Yosemite, for example, we are touched by the gentler grace of nature's everyday workings on a smaller scale: the flash of sunlight on a goldfinch's wing, the carpet of bluebells in a beaver's meadow. In such surroundings, we, too, are encouraged to establish a balance within ourselves, a tone and spirit of moderation. The park is not a maximum workout area, with weight machines and treadmills, nor is it a place of strenuous mental exertion. Rather, it is a temperature zone, much needed in American life today, a place where physical action and thoughtful contemplation, the natural and the cultural, the material and the spiritual can be reconciled.

Michael Pollen, one of the few writers on environmental issues who endeavors to strike a balance between preservation of the wilderness and economic development, has advanced the following proposition in his book *Second Nature*: "[T]he habit of bluntly opposing nature and culture has only gotten us in trouble, and we won't work ourselves free of this trouble until we have developed a more complicated and supple sense of how we fit into nature." Rather than "bluntly opposing nature and culture," we must seek an accommodation that will bring out the best in both. The Indian cultures achieved such an accommodation, using land but rarely abusing it.

Now we make much heavier demands on the land, in part because our culture has, to a great extent, divorced itself from the natural environment. But culture is not static; it changes as we change. Witness the movement of recycling and roadside cleanups from the margin to the mainstream, in a time span of less than twenty years. A family outing in one of the beautiful state parks of Iowa encourages such cultural changes. It inspires children to become more active participants in taking care of the environment in their own communities, and it encourages adults to contribute to changes in the local culture that bring it in closer harmony with the natural world.

Hopes like these were essential to the vision of Louis Hermann Pammel, father of Iowa's state parks and long-time contributor of papers to *The Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*. Pammel's story is told by Kent Pellett in the Winter, 1975 issue of *The Iowan*; this is the source of my information about Pammel's leadership in making Iowa one of the first states to develop a comprehensive plan of conservation.

The anniversary we are celebrating is the official date of the transformation, 75 years ago, of the Devil's Backbone region in Delaware County into Backbone State Park. This occurred early in Pammel's tenure as chairman of the Iowa Board of Conservation, a position he held from 1918 to 1927. But in fact he introduced the idea for Backbone at the first meeting of the board, in December 1918, with a simple argument: "The Indians protected these pines—why should we not do the same?" The Board not only approved this suggestion, but five days later reconvened in Council Bluffs to recommend the acquisition of the Lacey-Keosauqua area on the lower Des Moines River, in Van Buren county. So 1918 is in some ways as important a date as 1920. In reality, our park system was the culmination of a sustained effort that dates back at least to 1901, when Pammel, then a professor of botany at Iowa State University, called a meeting of conservationists to propose setting aside protective areas for the state's vanishing species of plant and animal life. From this meeting grew the Iowa Park and Forestry Association. Pammel's driving energy and determination led to the acquisition of more than 70 parks during and immediately after his tenure as chairman of the Iowa Board of Conservation, and Pammel State Park near Winterset is named in his honor.

As Pammel foresaw, in a society in which one suburban enclave may look much like another, the Iowa state park offers us a way of maintaining our "roots." By roots, I mean, of course, our links with our historical and cultural heritage, an aspect of state parks I have already discussed in relation to Pike's Peak. But I also mean that parks encourage a kind of groundedness, a sense of being anchored in the particulars and specificities of a certain place. You can't globalize a park; it's *here*, and nowhere else, existing only in this space, and so far as you are concerned, only during the time you are within its borders. Parks are marked off, set aside, separated from the rest of the world, as we are, too, for the period of our visit. At park boundaries, there are usually gates and signs to mark our passage: "Welcome; you are now entering the park area; gate closes at 10:00 p.m.; please drive carefully; take only photographs; leave nothing behind but your footsteps."

The experience of visiting a park for a few hours, or of camping in it for a week, makes our own boundedness within time and space more vivid in our consciousness. Within a space so demarcated, a time so limited, we can, paradoxically, gain a larger sense of our human freedom. We can learn to focus, to realize the contingency of our existence in the here and now. We can seize the day, appreciate the unfolding moment, and use that expanded awareness, that sense of temporal and spatial finitude, to give form and definition to our lives.

Let me conclude by focusing more closely on parks in relation to our sense of time, because I think this is as important as the concept of space to the park experience. The poet Goethe once remarked that even the most beautiful sunset in the world would become dull if it went on for more than fifteen minutes. Attention spans are short, especially in twentieth century America. It's not just land that has been commercialized and commodified; it's also, and especially, human time. As early as 1896, Thomas Macbride, professor of botany, later president of the University of Iowa, and one of the first to call for a system of parks in Iowa, commented that "our rural population is wearing itself out in an effort to wear out 'labor saving machinery.'" Wordsworth, in the early days of the industrial revolution, saw this problem in its infancy: "Getting and spending we lay waste our powers." Now we live by the uncompromising axiom: Time is money. Every waking moment is not only accounted for, but over-subscribed. We have learned to do four or five things at once: pay bills, keep an eye on the oven, make a phone call, feed the dog, often with the TV going as well, bombarding us with sound bites and sales pitches. In today's two-earner households, what we now call "quality time" has become the greatest of all luxuries. So when a family spends time in a park, and I use the word "spend" advisedly, parents and children are giving each other a gift, all the more precious for its scarcity.

But in using our time extravagantly—that is, by bestowing it on something as simple and fulfilling as a walk in a park—we discover the profound potential concealed within the hurried moments the clock ticks away. William Blake, in a poem called "Auguries of Innocence," gave us the formula for transforming our moments, opening them almost as if they were geodes, and revealing their hidden dimensions:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower:
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

This, I submit, offers another perspective on the underlying purpose of our park system. The Iowa state park is a place that encourages walking thoughts, where we hold infinity in the palm of our hand, and eternity in an hour.