

Hiking

In my early days, I loved to go exploring. It was a way to indulge my wanderlust, a way to test my courage and stamina. I wanted to see something of our world. Hiking was for me a healthy means of escape from the pressures of living in our modern world.

I never carried a backpack. They were practically unheard of at the time. Instead, I carried an army-surplus musette bag. It was made of green canvas, and it was smaller and lighter than a backpack. You could harness it to your back like a backpack, or you could change the straps on it and carry it with one hand.

In my musette bag I'd put a few oranges. When I was tired and footsore from climbing up and down the hills of the land, I'd stop and rest and eat them. Or under the hot summer sun, walking the fields and meadows and woods of the countryside, I'd sit and rest and eat them. It was a light lunch, nothing too heavy to slow me down. And the oranges always gave me extra energy to go on another mile.

Depending on the season, I had a variety of natural foods available to me. In late spring there were wild strawberries and gooseberries. Better still, in the full swing of summer, there were wild blackberries, raspberries, and plums, and early autumn brought apples to the trees of an old abandoned farmstead. Sassafras twigs made for something tasty to chew on while walking. Also in the fall there were black walnuts and hickory nuts.

In my musette bag I carried something called a "space blanket." It was made from a very thin sheet of aluminum on one side and a sheet of plastic on the other. In the winter months, my space blanket was warm. Being metallic, it trapped my body heat and retained it very efficiently. It helped me out when I went just a little too far, and got just a little too cold. The plastic side was red, so it drew in the sun's warmth. I could stop and warm up under a bitter January sun until I felt like facing the cold again.

Maybe it was 16 degrees outside. I'd stand on the frozen, snowy ground and look up at the cold, ice-blue sky. There was a coldness all around me – a harsh, frozen world, just as beautiful and terrifying as any other location on the planet. But only in interminable wintertime do we truly come to appreciate the warm and friendly summer sun.

In the milder months, my space blanket made for good protection from any sudden summer thunderstorm that came bullying its way across the prairie. I'd spread out my blanket and crouch under it until the worst of the storm passed. I'd see lightning flashing all around me, in the trees, and hear the roaring thunder and the angry rain slapping the soil, but it never occurred to me that my aluminum blanket was a target for lightning.

In the plowed fields of late spring, with fresh green shoots of corn coming up from the

black soil, I'd go walking at twilight. The moon would be rising in the violet east, giving me some light after dark. And in the west there would be a showcase of red and gold and blue, a dazzling sunset on the flat Illinois prairie. Gradually the stars would appear overhead, big ones and little, and bright ones and dim, and I knew them all. I could smell the fresh-plowed soil of spring, and it was a good smell.

Walking the fields at night can be a little frightening, especially when you're young. Your imagination takes over. It's dark and you can't see so well. You never know when some animal may lunge out of the darkness and attack you. I carried my single-shot .22 caliber rifle as protection, and I carried a flashlight, but I knew they weren't really enough to protect me. And when your flashlight reveals the glowing eyes of some strange animal, it chills you to the bone.

In the bright fields of summer, the corn grows taller and the rough-plowed soil smooths out gradually with each rainfall. I'd go walking and find Indian arrowheads, white against the black soil. Some were complete, some were broken by the tractor's wheels. All went into my musette bag. Those arrowheads were the last faint sign of a people who were here before us, the last faint sign of a vanished race.

Sometimes I'd see a bird feather lying on the ground, and I'd pick it up and study it, trying to identify the species. Sometimes I'd tie it in my hair and walk around with it like that, just like I were a wild Sioux Indian or something like that, although a Sioux Indian of German ancestry.

Tired of walking, I'd sit and rest in the tall grass, often on a flattened area that had been made by a deer. A deer had slept on this spot perhaps just hours before. Often I'd see several of these places in the grass, indicating more than one, maybe a family, had rested here. Often I'd see the deer themselves, bolting just as I came into view, running off into the nearby woods.

I saw dozens of dragonflies hovering in the wind, looking like a squadron of airplanes. I was serenaded by crickets and katydids and the tiny machine gun sound of flying grasshoppers. I was sung to by the birds.

The cottonwood trees in the summer breeze create a sound that soothes. The tall grass does a dance in the summer wind, bending and unbending, undulating field after field, and its effect is hypnotic.

In my musette bag I carried a small notebook and a pencil. I'd stop and write things down in it whenever I felt the need. I was always writing something. I could lie in the grass, my musette bag a pillow, and study the sky. Sometimes I'd see a jet airplane, a tiny silver speck streaking through the intense blue. Tiny to my perception, but in itself, huge and filled with passengers. They were flesh and blood humans traveling somewhere, people with lives of their own, with concerns of their own, totally unaware of me down below in the green fields.

Sometimes I'd see a lone hawk circling high overhead, barely visible in a sky that was white with humidity. Or I'd see one lower down, and see the wings, and the markings on the

wings, white and black and brown, ornamented in a sharp blue sky.

And then, as the afternoon sun began to draw long, sad shadows on the ground around me, my hike would be over. I had to go back. I had to rejoin this organized madness we call civilization. I had a home and I had possessions, but all of my possessions seemed to be so much less than what I had here, in the sun and the wind.

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