Nine Weeks: Into the Wild West

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Part I: Work

I listen to the radio in my car perhaps three hours a year because it's all used car commercials and bad music. Trying to find something good on the radio is like trying to find something good in a cluster of angry hornets. But for the hell of it that day, June 4, as I was driving across North Dakota, I turned my car radio on, hit scan, and – bam – through the speakers came the beginning of Pantera's "Cemetery Gates," one of my favorite songs. The lyrics hit home, as I'll tell why.

Is this some conspiracy?
Crucified for no sins...
It all seems so unreal
I'm a man cut in half in this world

I turned the volume up as loud as it would go, got my Toyota Camry up to eighty miles per hour, and drove like a man on a mission. I was on a mission. It was to get straight to the West, straight from the East. Surrounded by 1990s heavy metal, I reflected on the past few months of my life, which had been very hard on me and my family. Despite becoming an award-winning outdoor educator at a university in Upstate New York, I lost this job for others' political and personal gains under unethical circumstances. Despite colleagues and students fighting for my reinstatement, administrators hid under their desks while another one resigned. Before I knew it, I found myself turning in the keys to my office. Reflecting on this recent history, Cemetery Gates seemed relevant.

When the song was over I turned the radio off. My ears were ringing. I was ten miles closer to my destination, Little Missouri State Park, North Dakota, where I would spend two months building trails. The same week that I had lost my job in New York, I was offered a sweet trails job in the Badlands. The opportunity to return to my roots of trail building and be 1,800 miles from my former employer was too good to pass up.

I arrived at Little Missouri State Park that day and met one of my coworkers, John, an Illinois native making a name for himself as a trail builder. I assessed my surroundings, which were beautiful and remote. I was sixty miles from the nearest stoplight. Regarding camp life, I'd use a two-gallon pot for a shower and live in a tent in a primitive campground. I'd work every day unless it was raining. Life was good because life was simple. My other colleague, and longtime friend, Steve, arrived a few hours later. We were happy to see each other since we hadn't worked together since 2005. We shook hands and hugged. Then Steve eased into his role as project manager by asking me to be ready by 7:00 a.m.

The State of North Dakota manages money better than any other state. Amassing a $1.2-billion surplus in 2010, North Dakotans chose to invest part of their savings in trails. The style of trails they chose, sustainable design, was a particularly smart choice. Sustainable trails, those that do not exceed an average grade of ten percent and follow the natural shape of the terrain to aid in drainage, pay for themselves since the only cost is construction. Being void of nearly all maintenance obligations, these trails enable land managers to sit back and watch recreational bliss blossom.

It was good to be back in the trails business. Sunny, cool days for work and black, cool nights for sleep. My two-person tent seemed roomy, and showering with a bucket was quick and effective. The physical work sculpted my former office body into the body of a woodsman. Life was good. Well, until the ticks.

You see, where I'm from, the East, ticks are synonymous with Lyme disease. In North Dakota they're regarded as mere annoyances since they are dog ticks, not deer ticks. But, at least for me, this annoyance reached a critical level. Walk through just a quarter mile of tall grass prairie in the wrong place at the wrong time and you'll have more ticks on you than a hundred hound dogs do. After getting used to having ticks all over me (one time I picked off fifty of these little buggers in one go), life again was good again. Well, until the poison ivy.

Wading knee-deep through poison ivy to clear trail corridors had a fascinating result. Nothing happened. I did not get poison ivy. But then I remembered that it takes a few days for the infective oils to take effect. Within a week of encountering my first patch of poison ivy, a third of my body was covered with sore, oozing blisters. I itched during day, woke from my sleep and itched during night, at work, off work, you name it, I itched until I bled. The hour-long

drive to the nearest hospital for three prescriptions and a steroid shot in the butt was worth it. I was soon on the mend and life was good again. Well, until the snakes.

North Dakota has one species of venomous snake, and one is enough. The prairie rattlesnake grows as fat as a can of Coke, big enough to swallow rabbits and prairie dogs. After having grown tired of riding our ATV to the worksite each day, I decided to hike in, which entailed walking through tall-grass prairie. The first rattlesnake I almost stepped on was a black specimen the size of my arm. He stood his ground, coiled up, and then "stood up" to look around, hissing as he stared at me. If death chose to look like a reptile, it would look like this. The next week I encountered another rattlesnake, this one a beautiful pale yellow. He lay outstretched, displaying his full length, in the middle of the trail I walked down. Then he was polite enough to slink out of my way. The season went by fast, one workweek stacked on the other. With one day left until the end of the project, the ticks were dead, the poison ivy was behind me, the snakes went into hiding. Life was good again. Well, until the storm.

As I tell people back East, "There are thunderstorms, and then there are Great Plains thunderstorms." With twelve hours left until my departure from North Dakota, the campground host, Lynn, came over to our campsite. She said to Steve and I (John was on a well-timed vacation), "There's a tornado warning over the next hour. They think there's something coming this way." We didn't know who "they" were nor what that "something" was, yet Steve and I figured they knew more about tornadoes than we did and that that something was not good.

Within an hour, the sky blackened, becoming so dark that a streetlight came on despite it being ninety minutes before sunset. Steve and I looked at each other and abandoned the picnic shelter we were under. We climbed into the heaviest thing we could find, which was our Ford F-250 work truck anchored to a 3,000-pound trailer. Within an hour, the storm dumped 2.5 inches of rain and peppered our camp with hail the size of buckshot. During one five-minute period I counted sixty lightning strikes.

During the maelstrom's fiercest point, our canvas wall tent was destroyed by winds we estimated to be seventy miles per hour. The tent was mashed into a heap of fabric, poles, and stakes, and then all of the tent's contents, everything Steve owned, rushed out from underneath it. His mountain bike cartwheeled across the lawn and slammed into his Subaru wagon. Books, clothing, work boots, letters from home, diesel containers, cooking pots, a cot, and God knows what else whirled around in circles. The last time I saw Steve's sleeping pad, it was thirty feet in

the air and headed towards Manitoba. The storm moved away by 9:00 p.m., searching for new campgrounds to destroy and new lawns to flood.

While picking through piles of random soaked items that belonged to Steve the next morning, my last day in the Dakotas, he looked at me and said with a smile, "I bet last night you were thinking to yourself, 'Shit, I can't believe I'm gonna die in North Dakota.'" By noon I collected seven weeks' worth of pay for helping to build 18,000 feet of trail. I then drove southwest towards the Rocky Mountains, leaving the ticks, poison ivy, snakes, and storms behind. I learned why they're called the Badlands, not the Nicelands. I had earned my vacation.

Part II: Play

With my work done in Little Missouri State Park, it was time to explore the rest of my favorite playground, America. Leaving the park on July 23, I drove south for a few hours and then completed a four-mile hike up the highest peak in North Dakota, 3,506-foot White Butte. I had the mountain all to myself. Far below me, ranchers herded cattle across a broad, green field. They all looked like little ants.

Done with White Butte, I drove towards my next state high point, 7,244-foot Harney Peak, the crown of South Dakota and the Black Hills, a land I had not visited since 2004. Pulling into the Black Hills region at dusk, I found a rough dirt road that dead-ended at a Forest Service forest thinning project. Sleeping at 5,200 feet that night was good acclimation for the 14,000-foot peaks I'd be on in a few days.

I woke early the next morning and entered Custer State Park. Hiking up Harney Peak Trail by 8:00 a.m., I climbed steadily and smoothly to the top, which hosts a stone observation tower on the National Register of Historic Places. To get away from the crowds, I hiked down the backside of this mountain a bit, headed off trail, and relaxed in a hidden forest. I laid on my sleeping pad after digging three quarts of water and a book out of my pack. The plan was to spend all day at the 7,000-foot level to additionally acclimate.

The air didn't feel thin, and I felt great. The hike was a piece of cake after seven weeks of manual labor. I felt so good and so free that before I knew it I had what seemed like a good idea: naked sun tanning. Like a hippie, I stripped down to nothing and lay prone on my sleeping pad. No ticks, no poison ivy, no snakes, and no storms, a cool breeze blew as the sun shone down on

all of naked me. Soft billowing clouds eased across the horizon. It was an intoxicating setting that soon put me to sleep.

An hour later I woke. You couldn't put a price on a nap that good. I arose, stood on my sleeping pad, and decided it was time to put my hippie tendencies away, in addition to my unmentionables. I went to slip my shorts on but felt a tinge of pain on my backside. I thought I had biting ants on me. I turned my head to look at my low back and butt. I saw why naked sun tanning is a bad idea. The sunburn I saw on my ass was as red and as loud as a fire engine. Easing my shorts on I knew I had done wrong. By the time I returned to the Harney Peak trailhead, I walked bow-legged, like I had ridden a fiery horse. With painful expression creasing my face, I got more water at a fountain at the trailhead and then drove back to my 5,200-foot campsite. After dinner and sunset, I laid in my sleeping bag in terrible pain despite taking Tylenol and coating my sunburn with aloe.

I awoke the following morning after a fitful night. It felt like I had a hundred hypodermic needles stuck in my butt, and I could not escape the pain no matter what I did. I eased myself into my car like an old man and drove south towards my next state high point, 5,424-foot Panorama Point, the apex of Nebraska. I ran the mile up and back, despite signs warning people to not walk in the area due to herds of ornery Bison.

I gently got back in my car and continued driving south. I entered Colorado through the southeast corner of Wyoming and drove to the outskirts of Leadville, setting up camp at 10,200 feet. Concerning acclimation, I still felt fine despite my newest campsite being 5,000 feet higher than the prior one. The next day I drove to my next campsite, which was a roadside site near trails that led to 14,440-foot Mount Elbert and 14,428-foot Mount Massive, the two highest peaks in the state. To further acclimate, I hiked up to 11,200 feet and then descended back to camp.

It was time to see if my acclimation plan worked. By 7:00 a.m., on July 27, I was already at 11,000 feet on the Mount Elbert Trail. My sunburn was nearly healed by this time. I thanked God for his mercy. I thought I was the first one up the trail, but I soon I started passing piles of sidelined hikers who climbed too high too fast. One despondent woman peered at me and uttered, "This isn’t as much fun as I thought it would be." Before I knew it, I was on top of the highest peak in the Rocky Mountains. Being a loner at heart, I descended the backside of Mount Elbert to get away from the crowds and hang out with yellow-bellied marmots instead. I seemed

like the only one on the mountain not on a cell phone. Well, besides the marmots. After spending an hour on top, I descended before the afternoon thunderstorms arrived.

Mount Elbert may be highest, but that doesn't mean it's best. The next morning, I explored what may be the most beautiful peak I have ever summited. Aptly-named Mount Massive has more area above 14,000 feet than any other peak in the Lower Forty-Eight. It is everything and anything but small. The beginning of the Mount Massive Trail meandered through evergreen forests, while above 12,000 feet it saw only dirt and sky. The final scramble to the tiny summit was exposed but not dangerous, beautiful but not tame. On top I sat in the distance alone. A few picas kept me company. I admired them for living in such a beautiful place.

I had had enough of the wild man solo hiking and driving. For the rest of my trip, my girlfriend would explore America with me. We met in Denver and then traveled to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of southern Colorado. Being the straightest, longest range in the contiguous United States, and hosting more than a dozen 13,000-foot peaks, it was a fitting introduction for her. We hung around camp, caught up, and hiked to 12,000 feet. We were thinking of New Mexico, a place we had explored separately. She had been to Sedona. I had been to the Borderland. We tackled the highest peak in New Mexico, 13,161-foot Wheeler Peak. On this enormous mountain we hiked with picas, marmots, and mountain sheep. It was her first time above 12,000 feet. I was immensely proud of her. We lounged on top for a half-hour, and got chased down the mountain by one of the West's afternoon thunderstorms.

All good things must come to an end, though. It was time to go home. We stretched the return trip out as long as we could. We hiked the highest peak in Oklahoma, 4,973-foot Black Mesa, despite it being 99 degrees in the shade that day. We then visited the high point of Indiana, 1,257-foot Hoosier Hill, and the high point of Ohio, 1,550-foot Campbell Hill. On August 11, we pulled into our driveway. After building 18,000 feet of trail, sleeping in a tent for 66 nights, reaching 8 state high points, and driving 7,000 miles (bringing my Toyota Camry up to a proud 340,000 miles), my return home seemed abrupt. Summer was over. But home is where one's heart is. I went to bed that night and fell into a deep, deep sleep under clean white sheets.