

# America's Pedestrian & Ulster County's Man of Mystery

Two articles on this subject appeared previously in *About Town*. One with permission of Rodale Press and the other I wrote in 2008. The latter is available on our website: [abouttown.us](http://abouttown.us). The article below covers some of the same information but also material from a 2014 Rodale Press published book, "The Last Great Walk" by Wayne Curtis. Most interesting are the author's observations of the changes that have occurred in our national infrastructure of roads and bridges, and in the expansion of our cities, comparing the world of 1909 with Curtis' world when his book was written. Vivian Yess Wadlin

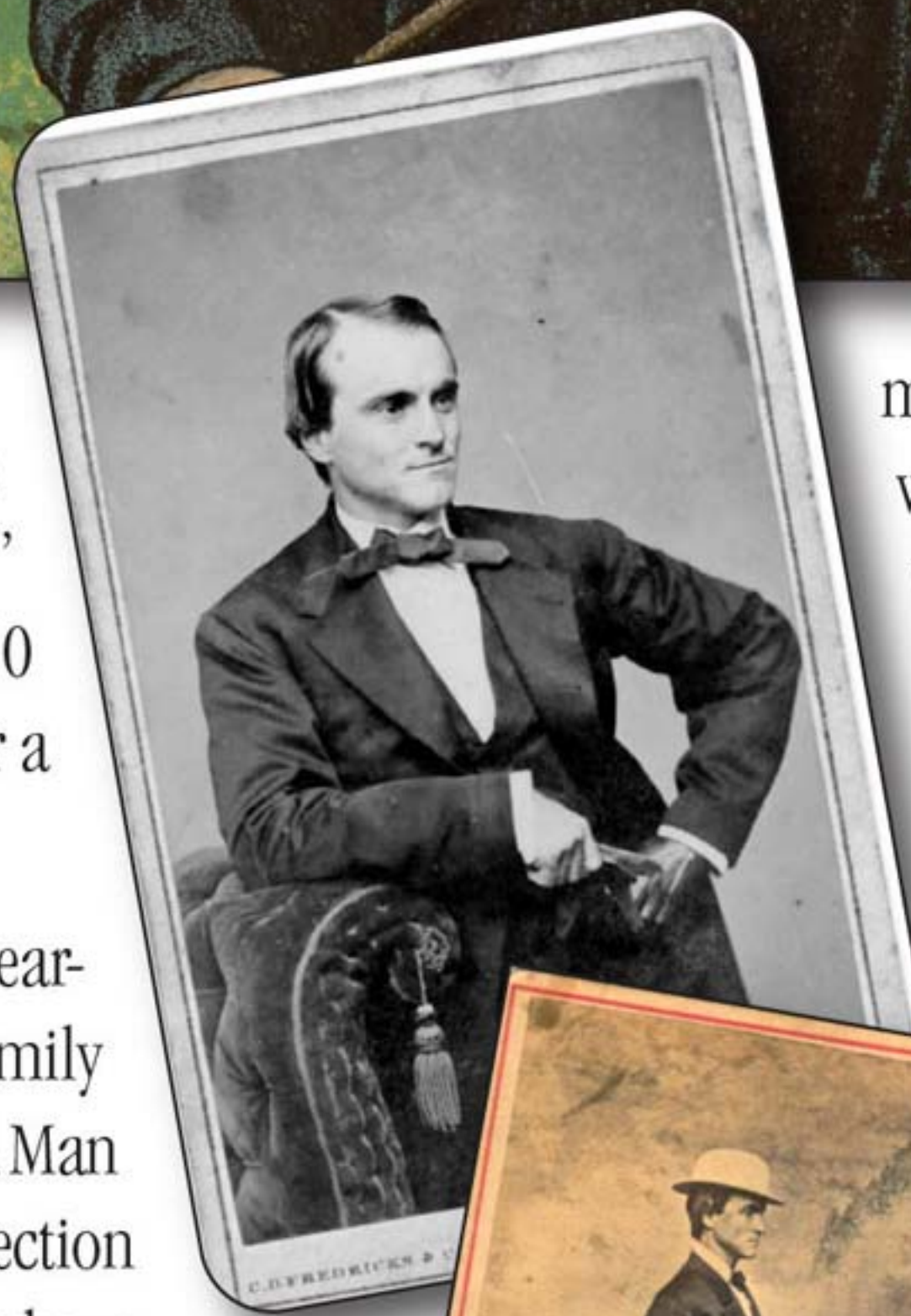
Today, the word "pedestrian" summons up the common, the lowly, or as my Websters' Collegiate Dictionary puts it so perfectly, "the unimaginably commonplace." Yet, there was a time, beginning in the 1860s and throughout the Victorian era, when the word described internationally-admired, if not outright adored, athletes who walked amazing distances in incredibly short times. Some walked against the clock, some against competitors, and some, such as our spirited American Pedestrian, against competitors, the clock, the weather, the mosquitos, and the earth's conformation, although not necessarily all, all at once.

Edward Peyton Weston was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on the Ides of March (Beware! the 15th), 1839. He was such a frail baby, the family feared he would not reach his first birthday—it seemed his very beginnings set him on a course of fortitude and resilience. He grew into a 5'7" handsome youth, never weighing more than 130 pounds. He also grew to become a man who chafed for a challenge.

An early manifestation of that longing was the 17-year-old Weston traveling for a year with the Hutchinson Family Singers. According to the 2012 biography of Weston, "A Man In A Hurry," the Hutchinsons were, "...not any old collection of travelling musicians. They were the most famous and successful American musical group of the 19th century and toured the States for decades, at one time making \$1000 per performance..." The group was openly anti-slavery, anti-alcohol, and pro-women's rights. One of their songs, Get Off The Track, became a "...protest song against slavery and an abolitionist battle-cry."

Weston's call-of-the-wild may have been a way to earn money, but more likely was a familial trait. Weston's school teacher father, Silas, left the family on several occasions to satisfy his need for adventure—the circus and gold mining in California were just two of the elusive draws taking the elder Weston away from home.

An impetuous young man, Edward sometimes made bets with his friends. One 1860 wager was life-changing. America was in an election year pitting Abraham Lincoln against Stephen A. Douglas. Weston bet his friend, George Eddy, that if the man from Illinois won, he, Weston, would walk to Washington, DC, for Lin-



**Edward Payson Weston, "King of Walkers" Reaches Last Goal**

By PAUL FREDERIK  
(United Press Staff Correspondent)

**NEW YORK, May 14**—Edward Payson Weston, walker of magnificent distances, rode a wheel chair to his last goal—death.

The "king of walkers" passed his 90th milestone, a mark he had set for himself, but the end which came Monday found him unable to use the legs that had carried him to triumph in more than 1,000 athletic tests.

Weston had scored any other mode of travel than his legs. As a spy and dispatch bearer during the war, he learned to rely on his own locomotion when the enemy shot his horse from under him.

At 22, he hiked the 448 miles from Boston to Washington to attend Lincoln's first inauguration. The trip took him 208 hours and he arrived two hours late, but Lincoln complimented him.

**Started Career**

The feat started Weston on a professional walking career. In 1867 he paced the 1,326 miles from Portland Me. to Chicago in 26 days. Forty years later he made the same distance in 12 hours less.

**CHAMPION DIES**

coln's inauguration scheduled to take place on March 4, 1861.

Weston was initially reluctant to fulfill his wager obligation. On reflection, he reconsidered—otherwise, this article, thousands of newspaper and magazine articles, Weston's autobiography, and several books relating his feats would not have reached the light of day. In addition to all this coverage was Weston's self-generated publicity. He was a natural. Carte de visites featuring Weston's handsome military bearing and firm, resolute jaw declaring his prowess were sold throughout his life and continue to turn up in auctions today.

Weston did not arrive in Washington for the inauguration, missing it by hours. However, he did make it to one of the inaugural balls and met the newly-minted president. Lincoln was said to have been impressed with the young man and offered to pay for his train ticket back home. Weston declined the offer, noting he wanted to prove he could do the walk in the allotted time, but in reverse. With Weston's first tantalizing taste of personal fame, he was ready to step out into the world as a pedestrian.

## Racing to Fame

The color image of Weston above is from an insert premium in the Champion Athletes Series included in the packaging of Mecca Cigarettes (think today's baseball card). The card's reverse provides the rationale for Weston's inclusion in the Mecca champion series:

EDWARD PAYSON WESTON is probably the greatest pedestrian that ever lived. He began as a professional walker in 1867, when he went from Portland, Maine, to Chicago, 1,326 miles, in 26 days. The next year he went 100 miles in 22 hours 19 minutes; in 1871, 200 miles, including two miles backward, in 41 hours; in 1874, 500 miles in 5 days 23 hours 38 minutes, including the first 115 miles in the first 24 hours; in 1906, 100 miles in 23 hours 54 minutes; in 1907, Portland to Chicago, 1,345 miles, in 24 days 19 hours; in 1909 from New York to San Fran-

Images: Top to bottom, Mecca cigarette packaging insert, "Series of Champion Athletes." One of many cards Weston sold or gave away. Early photo, also used as a give-away. May 14, 1929, Decatur Evening Herald, Decatur, Ill.—one of many newspaper stories on Weston's death.

cisco, 4,000 miles, in 104 days 7 hours. His greatest achievement was in the following year, when though over 71 years old, he walked from Los Angeles to New York City, a distance of 3,600 miles, in 78 days.

(For those of you paying Herculean attention, Portland and Chicago did not move farther apart between 1867 and 1907. It may have been Weston started or finished at different locations within the cities, used different routes, or used the same routes improved by straightening).

Spalding's Athletic Library, a publisher from 1892 to 1941 of exercise, sports, and sports rule books, in an undated story, noted that while in Europe, Weston won the Astely Belt, a coveted award for walking feats. Spalding's was not the only one interested in Weston's fitness and noted that doctors wanted to document the benefits of walking—who better than Weston to examine? From that same article,

On May 23, 1906, upon the invitation of thirty physicians of the two cities, Mr. Weston walked from the Philadelphia City Hall to the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York, a distance of 100 miles, in 23 hours 54 minutes. He stopped but once en route; he slept for thirty minutes at New Brunswick.

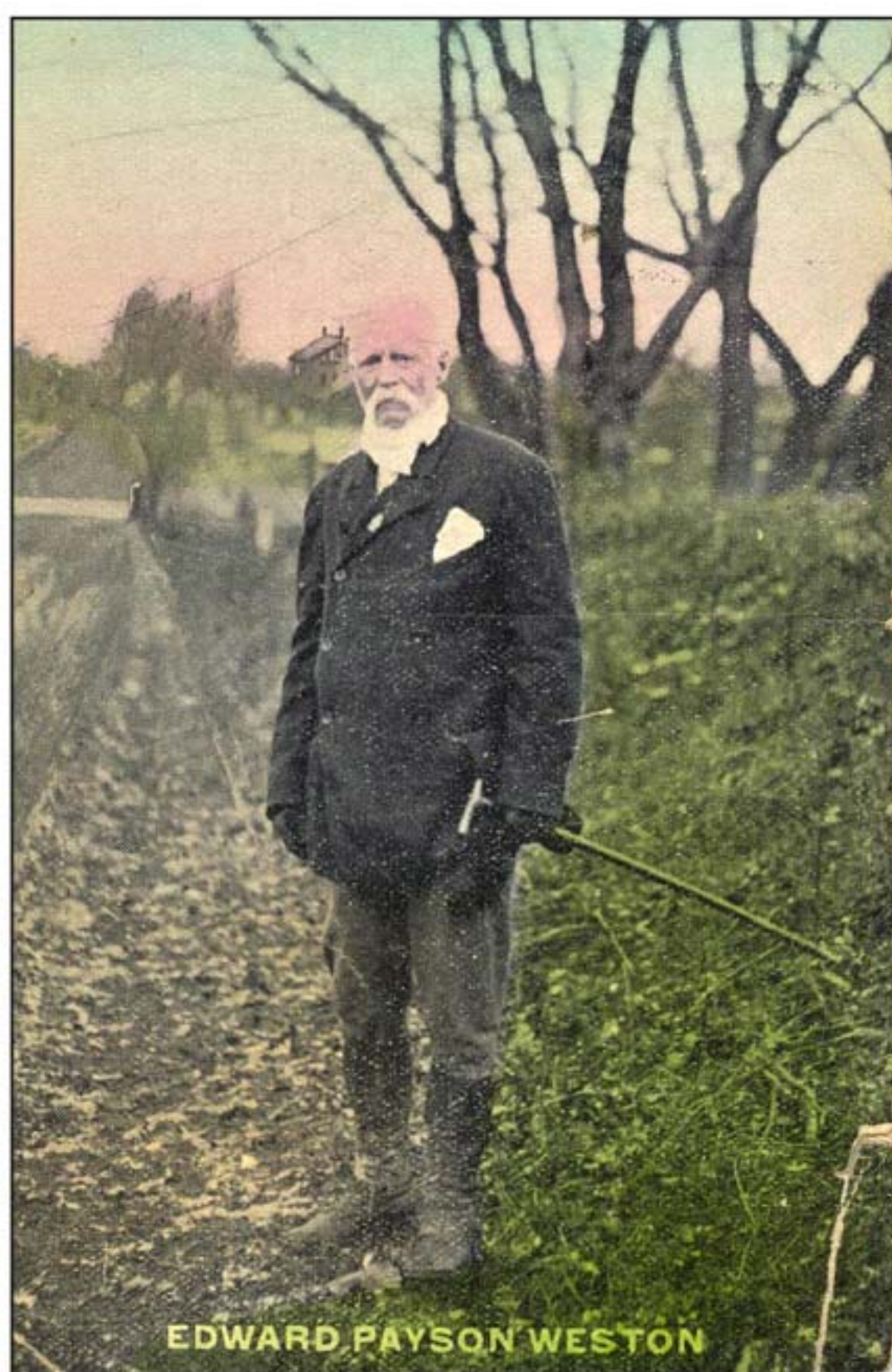
One source reported Weston rarely slept longer than two hours at a stretch when he was on a long journey. His aid would wake him after the two hours to make sure he did not cramp up by sleeping longer. Most of the time, he would continue on his journey after polishing off some milk and eggs.

One method Weston used to get all manner food, goods, and services donated along his trek was to name in newspapers the individuals or businesses that had shown him kindness. Even before he had a career, as when he walked from Boston to D.C. and met Lincoln, he carried flyers advertising all sorts of things and passed them out to people and families he hailed along the way. Often, if no one was about in a settlement, he would knock on doors. As it became evident that walking paid off, Weston engaged companies to outfit him with boots, socks, rain gear, and other items he needed that were also available to the public. He was a walking endorsement of those companies much as today's professional athletes wear the logos of supporting businesses.

In his autobiography, *The Pedestrian*, with the unsubtle subtitle, "Being A Correct Journal of 'Incidents' on a Walk from the State House, Boston, Mass., to the U.S. Capitol at Washington, D.C., Performed in 'Ten Consecutive Days' Between February 22D (sic) and March 4, 1861," he tells of his spy mission to deliver letters to Union soldiers behind Confederate lines. He was outfitted for the trip by what is today's Brooks Brothers for that adventure.

Weston always exhibited good taste in his attire. Every book, news paper and magazine article tells of his splendid attire—sometimes frock coats, large white hats, high leather boots, and always a riding crop. Between his refined good looks, his fame and his dapper clothing, it is no wonder the ladies of the era often threw him kisses and handkerchiefs.

Weston's prowess was not only on display in long-distance walking in the U.S. He competed often from 1876 to 1884 against the world's best pedestrians in England and elsewhere in Europe. He often bested them with his amazing stamina and recuperative abilities. In one contest, he offered prize money to anyone



**Postcard from Weston's walk in 1909.**

who could outperform him, either as an individual or as a two-man relay team. One man and one team did accept the challenge. Weston won handily. That story is written up dramatically in "Man In A Hurry."

Back to the walk cross country at the age of 71 as noted in the text of the cigarette package insert. "Then what?" you may ask. Weston knew that his direct competitive challenges were probably over. He believed he could still be of interest to the public as a lecturer. His life and fitness affirmed his belief that walking was the panacea for what ailed his species. He often opined just that while walking with journalists who accompanied him (for short distances).

Echoing Weston's conviction regarding the health benefits of walking is the book, *The Last Great Walk* by Wayne Curtis (2014, Rodale Books), the author uses Weston as a vehicle to discuss the physicality and health benefits of walking. The story is a mesmerizing exercise

combining history and health. The book's subtitle is "The True Story of a 1909 Walk from New York to San Francisco and Why it Matters Today." Curtis shadows parts of Weston's trek comparing what was along the way in 1909 to what Curtis found in 2014. One thing Curtis noted that had not changed was a stroll across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Curtis followed enough of Weston's walk in enough states to have telling comparisons between his and Weston's times. The conditions Weston endured were found in accounts in the newspapers of the day, including the *New York Times*. The condition of roads was always a topic. Weather exacerbated already terrible road surfaces and GPS was long in the future. Sometimes, the only route between two points was to follow railroad tracks. There were countless times Weston took a wrong turn going miles off course. Today, it is difficult to imagine slogging along a road in knee-deep snow or mud, but Weston ventured on to meet his obligations. And to win his purse.

Weston faced additional challenges including relentless curtains of mosquitos along his path. Dogs were also a constant worry and may explain the stick always in Weston's hand. Crowds were often another hindrance, sometimes city police had to make a path for the walker.

Sport Walking gained great popularity in the United states but not only because of Weston. Other noted pedestrians are introduced in the Curtis book. Around the time of our American Revolution, Robert Barclay Allardice was born in Scotland and was, by age of 15, being challenged to walking contests. According to Curtis, Allardice is credited with the swell of pedestrianism in the United Kingdom:

"His feet (and feats) were legendary; most famously, he walked one mile every hour for a thousand consecutive hours in Newmarket, taking about six weeks to do so and winning a bet of a thousand guineas. (Some hundred thousand pounds were reportedly wagered on the outcome by others)."

Emigrants from the United Kingdom brought to their new land the idea of endurance contests, often as pub wagers. It developed on both sides of the big pond into an actual sport as almost anyone could participate and make up their own contests as roadways improved and measures of time and distances became more accurate (thereby making wagers more (or less) sound).

*The Last Walk* is peppered with pithy advice from ancient and more recent

sages on the Elixir of fresh air and exercise, and of course, advice on walking. The three parts of the book, Body, Mind, and Land, weave back and forth on Weston's feats, the advantages of his regimen, and the current wisdom regarding health.

When Weston inquired as to his lecture prospects, he sent handwritten letters discussing what he had to offer and the situation he desired. A copy of one such letter, provided by the man who now lives in what had been Weston's Ulster County home (1914 to 1924, more on this later), was sent to the County Agricultural Fair Society. Weston's address on May 31, 1892, when the letter was written was the N.Y. Press Club, 120 Nassau Street, New York City. The letter begins, "It is now about 20 years since I had the pleasure of appearing at your Annual Exhibition and giving a practical illustration of the value of walking as a health-giving exercise."

According to his letter, Weston had been invited to give out the prizes to walking contest winners, and he suggested, that having ... "retired from public exhibitions on the track," he might give lectures at the event for which he would charge \$100 per lecture. He noted that in the last 20 years he had "...covered more than 60,000 miles in contests in America and England, and as a result, am now in perfect health." He would have been about 55 years old.

In 1914, Weston, age 77, purchased property on Martin Swedish Road in the Town of Esopus. He was living there with Miss Annie O'Hagan and, later, an eight-year-old boy, Raymond Donaldson, in a rural area of Ulster County, NY, known as Plutarch.

In summer 1921, my grandparents, Alousious and Maryia Yess, and three children moved to their new farm, also in Plutarch, about two miles from the Weston farm. My grandfather helped Weston by doing odd jobs. According to my father, when Weston and Miss Annie would be traveling back from some adventure and need to be picked up from a train station—Highland or New Paltz—they would send a telegram to my grandfather. He would go to Weston's house, hitch up the walker's surry, and drive to the station to bring the couple home.

The boy who lived with Weston and O'Hagan was sometimes described in the national media as the couple's "love child." This was untrue according to my father and confirmed in an interview by former Esopus Town Supervisor, Ray Rice with Rosner Wheeler, also a neighbor of Weston. Both Wheeler and my father said that in 1918, Donaldson's parents died in the influenza epidemic leaving Raymond and his older brother orphaned. Raymond's brother went to work at a large poultry farm between the Weston home and the Yess farm, and Raymond was taken in by his neighbors, Weston and O'Hagan.

As a boy, Wheeler and his friends would rummage through the abandoned Weston house. Wheeler described all sorts of ephemera scattered about attesting to the past glories of the pedestrian. One souvenir timetable and booklet about another trek said Weston was on a walk from New York to Minneapolis to lay the cornerstone of the New Minneapolis Athletic Club. Weston was to walk 1,500 miles in 60 days, "IN HIS 75th YEAR." The booklet also said Weston would wear the "...same kind of SOX he wore on his Wonderful Walk from Los Angeles to New York." The socks were to be known as "The Weston, Heel & Toe Walking Sox."

Always in debt, Weston undertook another walk in 1922. On September 5, he left from Buffalo, NY, headed to New York City. As always, he was accompanied by a wagon with supplies, extra clothing, food, and boots. Miss O'Hagan and a hired man were the supply wagon's occupants.

Weston was 83 and his only complaint was the automobiles "... were crowding him off the road." Nevertheless, he arrived two days ahead of schedule.

Two years later, on May 16, 1924, this headline appeared in the New York Times: "E.P. Weston, 86 is Shot in Attack on Home." Weston was actually 85. National and local news media carried the story—a gang of men with sticks, rocks, and a gun attacked the Weston house, broke every window, and eventually broke down the door with a sledgehammer. They cornered Weston in an upstairs bedroom, and after beating him, shot him in the leg.

Speculation was rampant on motives. Some thought he owed the gang money. Others thought area people did not like Weston living with a younger unmarried woman. Another theory was the locals wanted to illegally harvest timber and resented newcomer-owners prohibiting such activity. The Times article alleged the locals of Plutarch were of questionable character, but no one ever proved it was locals who attacked. The Chicago Tribune on May 18, 1924, chimed in saying the attack might have had something to do with the deaths of the Donaldson parents. In fact, there was additional speculation the attack might have been a publicity tactic. My father believed the attack did take place.

Weston said he would not spend another night in the house and true to his word, moved out. He noted he would not sell it, but as recorded by many newspapers "...keep it for the boy."

From Plutarch, Weston and his "family" moved to New York City. His mental and physical health began to decline. His fortunes, always tenuous, declined, as well.

Weston's earlier complaint about automobiles proved prophetic. He was hit by a taxi and confined to a wheelchair. Then destitute, Weston was rescued by the author of a wildly successful 1928 Broadway play, "Abie's Irish Rose." Playwright, Anne Nichols, set up a fund for Weston to live the rest of his life.

Weston died in May of 1929 and is buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery in Queens, NY.

\*\*\*

Shortly after finishing this article, I came across yet another book on Weston. Published in 2015, *Walk of Ages*, Edward Payson Weston's Extraordinary 1909 Trek Across America, by Jim Reisler, was published by University of Nebraska Press. From its cover, "He (Weston) was 'everyman' in a stirring battle against the elements and exhaustion, tramping along at the pace of someone decades younger." As a refresher, that walk was 3,895 miles which he covered in 104 days at age 70.

I was surprised and delighted to see a quote of my father's taken from one of my Weston articles in *About Town* and credited in *Walk of Ages*.

Unless otherwise noted, the images are from the collection of the author.

**AboutTown.us** for other stories of local history

