

People & Events

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A walk back in time

■ *Two men come together to produce a book that tells how walking's benefits extend far beyond physical fitness.*

By FRED ROSEN
Correspondent

IT WAS a chance meeting between two guys who shared a similar passion for walking that proceeded to make local literary history that may very well peak for the hikers — no pun intended — to the national level.

"Though I'd met countless hikers in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, I'd never met anyone like Michael, a man who really had taken his own path in life, 'Who is this guy?' I thought. 'And how do get to walk with him?'" Will Nixon wonders on page 7.

He soon answered his own question. He and Perkins proceeded to strike up a friendship that led to their collaboration together on a book, "Walking Woodstock: Journeys into the Wild Heart of America's Most Famous Small Town." Published by Bushwhack Books, it's a book of essays that provides the armchair hiker and adventurer a trip into the wilds of the town from the ground level up.

"The reaction to the book has been overwhelmingly positive," said Perkins, adding that at the Golden Notebook, an independent bookstore in Woodstock, "it's the number one bestseller in paperback for the year. I was amazed at the book's response."

"The Notebook sponsored a book signing in a Woodstock.

We didn't look up from signing books for two hours."

He also said the book is available through Barnes & Noble in the town of Ulster and throughout bookstores in Ulster County and the Mid-Hudson region. With more of

that kind of marketing success, the book can break into the amazon.com national rankings. The inspiration for this success comes from the back-grounds of Perkins and co-author Nixon.

Perkins said he sees their book as "the pop perfect armchair read. It's not a hiking book per se, but a book about friendship and the possibilities inherent walking an area."

Said Nixon, "I started hiking as a kid in Boy Scouts and in college in California at Stanford. I loved to go to hiking and camping in the High Sierras. Later on, I landed in Hoboken." He describes that as, "the dark ages of living in a city."

"I discovered I could take the train to Cold Spring or the bus up to to Harriman for day hikes. It became my outlet. I've been doing day hiking ever since then moved up to

Catskills in 1996 (to a log cabin in Phoenicia. Now I live in a cottage on the Sawkill."

Perkins has his own perspective. It is perhaps that dynamic that powers their collaboration, which works so well.

"Most people use walking as a meditation. I use it for transport and meditation," Perkins said. "I've been a walker since I came to Woodstock 30 years (ago). I walk from my house in Glenford into town and back. It's a seven-mile roundtrip."

"You see much more when you walk instead of ride," he added. "And what you see is

development of neighborhoods and landscape. You see things most people most people don't notice."

Perkins proceeded to give an example.

"The other day I was walking past at the same place I go past every day and noticed a birch tree. I'd never see it before, even though my eyes gone over it so many times. Walking slows down perceptions, so you can see things more clearly."

With communication com-



Will Nixon, left, and Michael Perkins stand on a trail at the Comeau property in Woodstock last week.

Freeman photo by Tania Barricko

Walking was very popular in 19th century

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ing at us faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive, letting up on the throttle of life can be a bit difficult. But Perkins uses history to show the importance of going to shoe leather, instead of cable and satellite.

"People want to walk but you need time to walk," he said.

"In the 19th century, people took that time. People came up to the Catskill mountain houses to walk around. It was a time when people walked long distances.

At the Irvington Hotel in Woodstock, there were two large verandas and people had walking contests there.

Edward Weston walked across the United States. He was living here in Woodstock when he did it."

From *The New York Times* of Dec. 1, 1867:

"A kind of pedestrian mania seems to afflict this country just now. We hear of erratic pedestrians rushing across this continent in every direction, just as the recent meteors traversed the heavens. Side by side with telegrams, announcing the progress

events in Italy, we find day after day telegrams announcing that of a pedestrian walking so many miles a day for so many thousand dollars."

Edward Payson Weston was a champion walker of the 1860s through the 1900s, when walking was a sport you could make money on. He celebrated his 70th birthday in 1909 by walking 3,000 between New York and San Francisco in 100 days. That averages out to walking 30 miles a day.

For Perkins and Nixon, hiking the woods is like stepping outside of human time, from the fast-paced world of change we live in, back in time to Weston's historic and storied past, still to be seen in the primeval forest. Civilization, however, does occasionally infringe. Behind one of the author's homes is an historic road and a brand new house situated right in the middle of road.

Perkins' family hails from Kentucky, though he grew up

in southern Ohio, in a small town called Woodsmith. He left as soon as he could and went to the Big Apple, where he attended New School and City College. Then he traveled, to Europe and to Woodstock in 1972, where he fell in love with the area and settled. Since 1975, he's lived on Ohayo Mountain Road in Glenford.

"In Ohio," he said, "walking in Ohio, people might shoot you if you walk anywhere on their property. People are jealous of their property. People in the United States have (a) different sense of their community than Europe. They have a more organic sense of community and are more likely to share."

Of course, part of that jealously stems from simple economics. If a New Yorker comes north for a weekend or holiday, they want to get away from it all at their second home. The last thing they want to see is somebody disturbing their privacy by hiking on their property. And even the recession has affected the Woodstock hiking experience.

"I see it mostly in the village and hamlet of Woodstock," Perkins said. "So many stores empty and for rent. So many businesses that have started up and failed. And the eviction signs."

But despite all that, "A famous designer said this was the most beautiful landscape he had ever seen. The landscape is riveting. There are many stories of people who left the mountains who had to come back. But, for many, the town is no longer as affordable as it was in the '70s."

REGARDLESS OF the economics, the hiking experience itself doesn't change. Perkins has some very specific advice for what to wear, carry and pack during a hike, especially the more-challenging ones.

"Wear a hat and sturdy shoes. I prefer carrying a stick. It gives you good balance up and down hills. You should carry a bottle of water and snacks. It's also nice to have a companion. Realize you are walking to mostly have a sense of being out, enjoying your freedom for an hour or so. Don't think it's going to be a drag. No matter the weather, put your pedal to the metal as you look for a chance to be free.

For Nixon, hiking Woodstock continues to be an adventurous experience.

"Within one year, 1996, I hiked the 35 highest peaks in the Catskills to become a member of the 3,500 Club," he said. "That is very well-

known to hikers.

"To me, the discovery and pleasure of this book was getting into the low peaks, the hills of Woodstock. While some are substantial hikes and climbs, their elevation doesn't put them among the



Nixon

highest. But it got me to go exploring off the beaten path and go up hills I wouldn't bother with, to find nooks and crannies in Woodstock, to be reminded how much wild land still exists. It is not easily forgotten, once you walk into that very wild place."

Added Perkins, "There an 'unknown' quality to it, like just around that next corner you might see something you have never seen before and may never again."

Upcoming events for the co-authors include a book signing at the Barnes & Noble, 1177 Ulster Ave., in the town of Ulster on June 3 at 7 p.m. in advance of National Trails Day on June 5. In addition, the Woodstock Land Conservancy has invited Perkins and Nixon for a book signing and a walk through the Comeau property on June 12 at 2 p.m.



Freeman photo by Tania Barricklo

Nixon, left, and Perkins walk on the Comeau property.