

PREFACE

I had only been backpacking for one night in my life before I began to prepare for a yearlong backpacking adventure. With excitement and trepidation, I had accepted a fellowship that allowed me to spend my first year after college hiking alone on four continents to explore the idea of wilderness. Since I had been car camping over the years with my family, I knew that the first stop to prepare for the trip, after the library, was my local outdoor store.

The inspiration for this trip was partly intellectual: the history of wilderness is a central topic in environmental history, which I planned to study in graduate school. Before I started my studies I wanted a better understanding of the wilds beyond the United States. The trip was also deeply personal. Family road trips when I was a child shaped my romantic association with the wild and with mountains in particular. When I was ten or eleven I longingly read my brother's *Boy Scout Handbook* and ticked off the merit badges I imagined I would have earned if only I had been eligible to join that club. Ms. Guth's eleventh-grade history class introduced me to the Rocky Mountain School painter Albert Bierstadt and his oversized canvases of sublime mountain beauty in Yosemite. Camping trips with my parents and siblings in western national parks taught me how to set up a tent, poke at a fire, and wear a hat to keep warm at night.

For an urban upbringing, my young adult life was full of messages that the mountains were where to go to feel *real*. I listened to books on tape like *Hatchet* and *My Side of the Mountain*, where courageous boys (always boys)

lived in trees and learned the ways of the woods. Our family calendar of black-and-white Ansel Adams nature photography taught me how to see natural landscapes as the opposite of my everyday life in Los Angeles. I had applied for the post-college fellowship because I saw it as my chance to become the outdoorsy person I wanted to be, which to me meant that I wanted to be self-reliant, brave, non-materialistic, physically strong, and competent at managing details and surviving.

Gripped with the desire to exude expertise that I didn't entirely possess, I went to Adventure 16, a Southern California outdoor retailer. Before I went I read guidebooks and imagined what I'd look like walking along Scotland's West Highland Way or climbing up Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. But now, with the departure day only weeks away, I stood nervously at the wall of wool socks, comparing tan and brown. I reassured myself confidently that picking the right gear in that metropolitan store would be the key to my success in the great outdoors.

Ultimately, I chose an orange nylon rain jacket, some Capilene long underwear, and a women's down sleeping bag that was supposed to keep me warm down to fifteen degrees. Friends gave me old fleece gloves and an MSR Dragonfly stove, among many other items. I arranged this ensemble of new and old in my green, seventy-liter Gregory internal-frame pack, confident that checking the boxes on my packing list meant I was prepared *and* that the gear would bestow the power of belonging.

Of course, I chose wrong. The gear made my beginner status glaringly obvious. My spork snapped in half. My cornflower-blue shirt was too bright and clean to be worn by anyone other than a newbie. I also had more pressing concerns: I could light my stove, but didn't know how to fix it when it broke. Tucked into my lime green down sleeping bag, I was cold every night because I didn't realize the cold was seeping up from the ground through my thin sleeping pad.

Worse yet, backpackers I met along the way commented on my (poor) choices. From the Appenzell in Switzerland to Patagonia in Chile, I got the same questions: Why did you pack so much? Why did you pack *that*? Our conversations about equipment and clothing sometimes gave me insights into local hiking culture. At other times, however, they were condescending

lectures intended to highlight the speaker's supposedly superior knowledge. People questioned my expertise because I was young and a woman, I knew. But I also learned something less obvious in those discussions about gear: what people brought on the trail was inextricably linked to the meaning they assigned to their outdoor experiences.

It turns out that my packing list was so very American. Not just the brands I sported—REI, Patagonia, Smartwool—but the ideas behind the gear: how to layer, how to deal with the rain, how to eat on the trail, the bromide that “cotton kills.” Reading adventure fiction and scouting handbooks in my childhood had shaped my experience as a young adult traveler more than I realized. I believed that there was a Right Way to dress and equip myself, just as much as the folks I encountered around the world believed in a different “right way.”

Over many months, I grew stronger shouldering my too-heavy pack, learned how to fix the stove so I didn't have to eat granola for dinner, and became more confident on the trail. Over many miles, I reflected on why I thought acquiring the right gear would turn me into the person I wanted to be. Where did my packing list come from? As it turned out, these questions would shape my academic research for the next decade.

The year after my great adventure, I began graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, happy to begin writing about mountains rather than climbing them. Though I still hiked and dabbled in other outdoor sports, I didn't become the wilderness guide or park ranger that I'd imagined becoming as a teenager. Instead, I became a specialist in the meanings Americans attach to their experiences in nature. I am now a historian of outdoor gear—and the first person to claim such a job description. I'm an expert in unpacking the packing list, studying what Americans bring to nature and why that list of seemingly mundane goods matters.

When I combined what I learned in school—the cultural evolution of ideas of manhood, the search for authentic experience as a response to modernity—with my time on the trail, I finally began to answer the questions that followed me earlier. There are no “right things” to buy for the trail, since notions of what is right or even what is comfortable are specific to place and time. And stuff does not inherently define character—only my

education in adventure fiction and scouting magazines, and comparisons of my tent with my neighbor's, had taught me that misperception.

Although my specific path to the woods might have been unusual, my quest to prove myself as an expert hiker—via shopping—turns out to have been a quintessential American experience. For more than 150 years, outdoor equipment and clothing has been a treasured and necessary component of the American outdoor experience. Indeed, many would-be outdoor enthusiasts in the 1920s spent more time shopping for a fringed buckskin jacket or an imitation Buck Skein™ jacket than they did wearing it on the trail. Why Americans go shopping on the way to the woods, and what the things they buy say about who they are, became the central focus of my research, as it had already been in my personal life.

For this history of the outdoor industry, I looked at a wide variety of archives and publications. I consulted historical documents such as Duxbak hunting apparel catalogs from the 1920s, guidebooks like *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills* from 1960, and DuPont advertisements from 1980. I visited the archives of outdoor companies, viewing material historians had never looked at, such as old catalogs and advertisements at Adventure 16's headquarters in San Diego and the formal archive at the W. L. Gore & Associates headquarters in Newark, Delaware. I complemented this research with an examination of actual material objects such as a first-generation Gore-Tex rain jacket and a nearly disintegrating Trapper Nelson packboard, a wooden frame with straps used as a kind of backpack. I also interviewed outdoor enthusiasts who showed me their closets full of gear dating back a half century and shared what the shredded t-shirts and surplus pants meant to them. These oral history interviews with outdoorspeople active from the 1950s to the present allowed me to get at the most elusive aspect of any history of consumption: how actual consumers used and thought about the products they purchased. To trace the role of the military in the industry (and of the industry in the military), I used not just the widely known records of the ski troopers of the 10th Mountain Division but also the much bigger collection of the Quartermaster Corps, the home of research and development on uniforms and equipment for the U.S. Army.

This book introduces new characters alongside famous figures from the outdoor past. There are business owners whose now hundred-year-old busi-

nesses are still popular, such as Eddie Bauer and L. L. Bean. There are gear-makers Alice Holubar and Mary Anderson, who were as important to shaping the industry as better-known gear company owners Yvon Chouinard of Patagonia and Johnny Morris of Bass Pro Shops. There are people famous for climbing mountains: Everest climber and REI manager Jim Whittaker, as well as famous people who climbed mountains. A young Robert Redford, for example, chose the college he attended based on his love for the Holubar Mountaineering shop. But most of the outdoorspeople are ordinary consumers: Pennsylvania hunter Harold Bomberger, who bought a red plaid Stag Cruiser in the 1920s and wanted to show it off to his hunting buddies, and Montana hiker Kristi DuBois, who sewed a jacket from a Frost-line do-it-yourself kit. The experiences of industry professionals and customers are at the heart of this story, for they are the ones, in the end, who created outdoor culture.

I didn't realize until years later that many of the items I bought for my backpacking adventure actually have origins in the U.S. military. I didn't understand that the synthetic fibers I took for granted in my long underwear had been part of a long trend of technical innovations in chemical companies. I hadn't considered how the prohibitive costs of the new goods I acquired—made possible in my case by the generous support of the fellowship—as well as the mystique of my borrowed goods necessarily excluded whole swaths of people from accessing these particular goods and looking like they belong. I shared this ignorance about my pack's backstory with most outdoor enthusiasts, who number in the tens of millions each year in the United States.

In the twenty-first century, as in the previous 150 years, Americans have learned to feel most themselves on the trail or river, in the RV, by the campfire. And for every family camping trip, for every backpacking excursion, for every fly-fishing afternoon, Americans go shopping first. This is, of course, because there is necessary equipment that makes the activities possible. But Americans are also hoping that the products that fill their backpacks, dry bags, or panniers will open the way to authentic experience. This book is written for gear-lovers by a gear-lover, explaining where all these goods come from and just why they end up on Americans' packing lists.

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