

## EDWARD PAYSON WESTON - WESTON THE PEDESTRIAN

We tend to think of England as the home of Pedestrianism and so it is. But during the 1800's, America produced its own wonderful long distance walkers. The best of them was without doubt Edward Payson Weston (1839-1929) whose performances set the walking world alight. This article by Mara Bovsun sums up his wonderful career which spanned over 50 years.

It was a box of hothouse flowers, a gift from the wife of the editor of the New York Herald to the wife of the postmaster general that started it all for Edward Payson Weston in February 1859. The flowers had been sent from the editor's residence and were to be picked up at the newspaper's downtown office, then whisked to Washington by train. Weston, a skinny 19-year-old copyboy, forgot that he'd been given the job of unloading the box. The delivery wagon was well back on its way uptown before he realized his oversight. In a panic, he lit out after the runaway buds, determined to overtake them on foot. Amid catcalls from his colleagues, Weston - who had always been sickly - took off at a tremendous clip. Lucky for him, traffic was heavy and the wagon had been creeping along. Nevertheless, he had to hightail it all the way to 70<sup>th</sup> and Broadway before he caught up. For saving the day, young Weston's pay was doubled and he was given the chance to write about his heroics in the newspaper. But the adventure gave the aspiring newsman more than an extra \$3 a week. It showed him he could make a name for himself simply by putting one foot in front of the other. That name would be Weston the Pedestrian.

The papers started calling him that after Abraham Lincoln's inauguration in 1861. Weston had made a bet: If Lincoln won, he would walk from Boston to Washington in 10 days, timing it to be there to witness the new President take his oath. Bands and cheering admirers met the young ambler along the road, and he was feasted, feted and kissed by the ladies. He missed the inauguration by half a day, actually, but the stunt was so impressively fanfared that he was brought to meet Lincoln, who offered to pay the young man's way home by means other than foot. Weston declined, saying that since he failed the first time, he would vindicate himself by walking back. After the war, in 1867, with a 1,326-mile jaunt from Portland, Maine, to Chicago, Weston decided to make his living with his feet. At the time, this was not such an outlandish ambition. Long-distance walking was a glamour sport. Arenas would routinely fill to the rafters for walking matches and record attempts. Weston became a great crowd pleaser, with his black velvet knee breeches, blue sash, white silk hat and kid gloves.

Five years after the Civil War ended, he started to smash records. In 1870, he walked 100 miles in 22 hours and 19 minutes. He failed to reach his next goal - 500 miles in six days - until 1874, when he finished with time to spare, becoming the Champion Pedestrian of the World. That status didn't last long. Nipping at his heels was one Daniel O'Leary, an Irish farmer who had settled in Chicago and who, in 1874, challenged the champ to a walkoff. Weston refused. The newcomer was too green, he said; let him come back after he broke some records. O'Leary did just that, shattering Weston's 500-mile mark. Weston could no longer stroll away. He agreed to meet O'Leary in Chicago for a six-day race in November 1875. And O'Leary burned up the track, leaving Weston more than 50 miles behind.



**Weston at age 71 during his walk across America**

First the defeated Weston headed overseas, where he won the Astley Belt, London's six-day walking match, with 550 miles in 142 hours, 100 miles ahead of his nearest rival. Then, just before leaving London, he set a speed record of 127 miles in 24 hours. When he returned to America, he continued to chase new challenges, seemingly growing stronger and faster each year, to the amazement of the doctors who poked, prodded and monitored the athlete. But still he hungered to take on O'Leary once more. And in 1886, he challenged his old nemesis to a

march from Newark to Chicago. This time, O'Leary was left panting in the dust.

Weston kept at it for years. At 68, he beat the time he'd made on his Maine-to-Chicago tramp four decades earlier by 29 hours. But it wasn't until he passed threescore and 10 that he really started cooking. Weston at 71 starts a 4,300-mile walk, reported The New York Times on March 16, 1909, a day after Weston's birthday. The course would go from New York to San Francisco. Weston planned to make it in 100 days. "Walking with a springy step and a general jaunty air, Weston crossed Park Row and started the first course of the trip up Lafayette St.," chronicled The Times. "The short cane which he carried gave him a striking appearance as he clasped it with one hand behind his back and the other over his shoulder." Fans turned out by the thousands to welcome their hero along the route. He was snowed on, rained on, attacked by mosquitoes, menaced by hoboes. Crossing the Rockies, winds were so strong that he had to crawl on his hands and knees, four miles in 24 hours. But the old man pushed on, hitting San Francisco in 104 days. The worst failure of his life, he grieved.

The next year, he tried again, this time starting from Santa Monica, aiming to reach New York in 90 days. He did it in 76. After his last big walk, from New York to Minneapolis in 1913, Weston the Pedestrian fell on hard times. In 1927, at age 88, he was looking for work as a messenger in New York. Instead he found a benefactor - Anne Nichols, author of the hit "Abie's Irish Rose" - who established a trust fund for the old champion. Then he was struck by a New York taxi and spent the next two years confined to a wheelchair, unable to take a single step, until he died at 90.