

BOOKS

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A thorough treatment of Thoreau's trip

BY KATE FRESHE
Special to the Sunday News

For generations, the road trip has been popular among writers and artists looking for inspiration, including Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank.

Long before them, 19th-century transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau set out seeking something else: respiration. "A change of climate" was recommended as a cure for what ailed so many of his time: the dread consumption.

Writer Corinne Hosfeld Smith, who first read Thoreau as a Hempfield High School student in the 1970s, embarked on her own excursion in order to produce "Westward I Go Free: Tracing Thoreau's Last Journey." The Columbia resident's

400-plus-page book covers a period in the year before Thoreau's death from tuberculosis in 1862, when he went with the young botanist Horace Mann Jr. from Massachusetts to Minnesota and back, via railroad and riverboat.

Smith's book, a must-read for Thoreau fans, fills in the gap in knowledge of his life post-"Walden," which was published in 1854.

The author learned of Thoreau's journey while living in Illinois in the 1990s. Figuring out the rail lines he traveled, she learned she was crossing over those tracks on her daily commute. That was the impetus for her to do the research for this book, published

by Green Frigate Books in 2012.

An introductory chapter includes information about Thoreau's life prior to the trip. Then the book proceeds to dissect the expedition with great attention to detail, showing Smith's extensive research as well as passion for her subject.

She includes weather conditions experienced by Thoreau and Mann, travel costs, train route names, comparisons to current-day travel routes, and information about the towns visited and passed through. This exemplifies Smith's dedication to preserving a piece of forgotten Thoreau history. The book even features



topographical information (past and present), which mirrors Thoreau's transcendentalist attraction to nature — very Walden-esque.

Photographs and drawings of the areas traveled, then and now, fill the book. Journal entries and excerpts from Thoreau's writings are also found throughout.

Certain stories from Smith's research journeys give the book a personal touch, amongst the mounds of facts and information. And further romanticizing the road trip tradition, each chapter includes a "When You Go" section guiding the reader on a modern version of Thoreau and Mann's trip. These sections provide exact information about landmarks from the journey that Google Maps and a GPS can't match.

The reviewer is a former Lancaster Newspapers employee. Follow Corinne Hosfeld Smith's current retracing of Thoreau's route at thoreausjourneywest.com/follow.htm.

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