PRAIRIE TREK EXPEDITIONS
RECORDS, 1926–1982

Collection Information

Biographical Sketch

Scope and Content Note

Series Contents

Cataloging Information

Processed by

Charles Latham
1988
and
Paul Brockman
August 2007

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:

Manuscript Materials: 45 document cases; 3 oversize folders; 2 bound volumes

Visual Materials: 3 boxes of photographs; 1 box of color photographs; 2 folders of oversize photographs (OVB); 1 folder
oversize color photographs (OVB); 21 boxes of slides; 1 video
tape; 5 boxes of 4x5 acetate negatives; 4 4x5 color acetate
negatives; 4 bins of 120 mm acetate color
transparencies/negatives; 2 bins of 35 mm acetate color/black-
and-white negatives,

COLLECTION
DATES: 1926–1982

PROVENANCE: John Howie, Columbia, Missouri, January 1988

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ACCESSION
NUMBER: 1988.0184

NOTES:

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The Prairie Trek is a summer camping activity in the American Southwest which combines camping with educational
experiences in natural science, crafts, and archeology.

The Trek began in 1926 when Hillis L. Howie, Scoutmaster of Indianapolis Troop 18, with the assistance of another
adult, led nine Boy Scouts on a tour of the American West. Early expeditions consisted of approximately sixteen boys,
ages 13–18, and three adult leaders. The group would leave Indianapolis by station wagon and truck, and drive nearly
5,000 miles through Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, before returning to Indianapolis. During
the trip, the boys were expected to take responsibility for setting up camp, cooking and clean-up. There were
opportunities for hiking, mountaineering, bird-watching, and exploring ghost towns and deserted Indian cave-
dwellings and pueblos. The boys were encouraged to pursue a particular interest on the trip; this could include any of
the natural sciences, special crafts, archeology, or photography. The expeditions were always run as educational trips,
and in 1930, the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis began commissioning the Trek as a field expedition to bring back
specimens, photographs, and movies.

In 1934 Mr. Howie began to expand and institutionalize the Trek’s activities. A separate girl’s expedition, called the
Turquoise Trail, began under the leadership of Mrs. Donald Jameson; it became a regular feature after 1940. In 1934
Mr. Howie purchased a 500-acre tract of land near Thoreau, New Mexico (Cottonwood Gulch) to serve as a base
camp. In the following year the Trek was organized as a non-profit educational institution under the name of the
Cottonwood Gulch Foundation, and the Thoreau property was deeded to the foundation. In 1960 a program for
younger campers was started and was named the Little Outfit.
Mr. Howie continued as the director until 1970. In the winters he worked in various educational positions, including headmaster of Orchard School (1932–1938) and the Community School in Clayton, Missouri. In 1970 he “passed the torch” of the directorship to Thomas M. Billings, Jr., but he continued to serve as a trustee of the Foundation until his death in June 1982.

Prairie Trek and the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation continues to serve as a pioneer program in educational summer camping; now serving the entire United States from its offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Sources:
Information supplied from an unpublished history by Charles Latham, Jr. in 1983.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The first series contains organizational material regarding the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation. Items include negotiations for purchase of the property in 1934; organization of the Foundation, 1935; and board meetings and correspondence. There also are correspondence with the Foundation’s lawyers, particularly John E. Perry of Gallup, New Mexico and material on obtaining tax exempt status from the IRS, the State of New Mexico, and McKinley County. There are records dealing with additional land acquisition, the construction of new buildings, and rental arrangement for property use by outside groups. In addition, there are records regarding the obtaining of permits from the ICC to operate the Foundation’s trucks in the four-state area covered by expeditions; insurance; the handling of accidents involving campers; and various forms used in administration.

The second and largest series of manuscript materials contains the papers of the director. Records include efforts to recruit campers including trips around the country and correspondence with camp agencies, and advertising and brochures; methods employed in organizing summer camps such as the logistics for getting the campers and staff to the base camp and opening the camp; organizing activities for trekkers while at base camp and on expeditions; arranging for cooks and meal preparation; obtaining supplies and maintaining relations with other camping organizations, especially the American Camping Association; and keeping account of the day to day expenses of outfits and campers.

The third series involves the recruiting and training of qualified camp personnel. Materials include correspondence with staff members; evaluations by staff of their summer’s work; applications; and methods used for training.


Series five contains historical information regarding Prairie Trek. Each outfit kept a log, and an account of the year’s experience was sent to each participant. In addition, some trekkers wrote papers of their experiences. There also is one scrapbook of clippings that presents a running history of the first twenty-five years of the organization.

Series six contains an enormous amount of visual materials documenting the organization and its participants. These are mostly unidentified black and white slides showing the activities of Prairie Trek and Turquoise Trail from approximately 1927 through 1976. There is also one VHS format tape with footage copied by staff members from Howie’s 16 mm home movies of Prairie Trek and Turquoise Trail. Henry L. Berman of Boston, copied the original film to video. More recently, Larry Barker assisted Director Monty Billings in editing the raw footage and putting a sound track to the edited material.

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Howie Group and Olmstead Group at Cottonwood Gulch, 1947

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**The Prairie Trek Expedition**

**Turquoise Trail Expedition**

**The Early Years: 1927–1958**

**Video Storage**
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2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, M 0390).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.