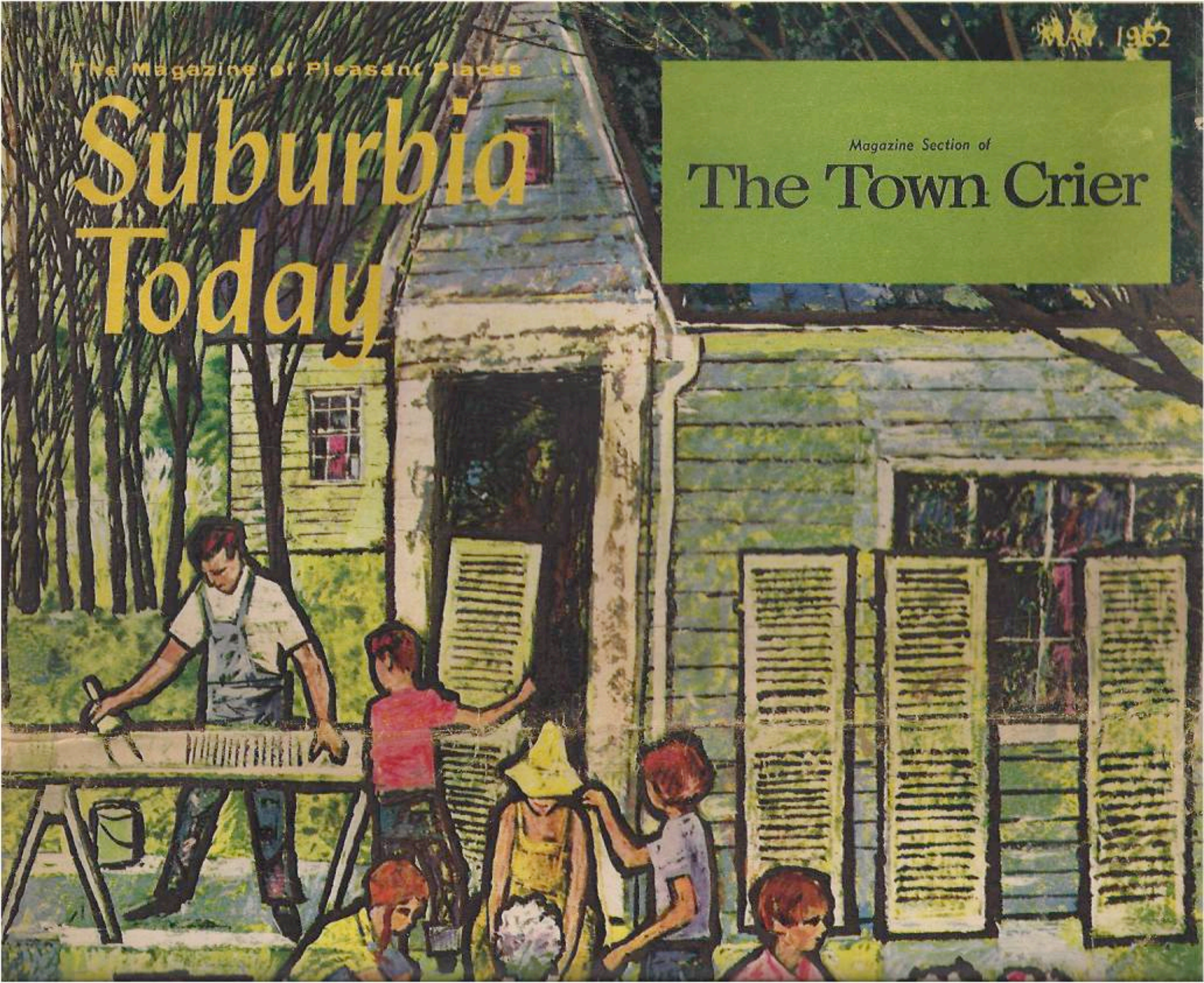


MAY 1962

The Magazine of Pleasant Places

Suburbia Today

Magazine Section of
The Town Crier





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HAND ME DOWN MY

See the world on foot under a soft May sky. A walk

BY COLIN FLETCHER

LATE ONE FRIDAY EVENING I put down my phone after the most frustrating call of a very long day, leaned back in my office chair, and said to myself, "If I don't get away from it all—right away—I shall go mad."

Like most of us, I'd had the idea before. But this time I felt a desperate need to do something about it. I did. At nine o'clock next morning I shut my front door behind me and, wriggling my shoulder blades a little apprehensively beneath the straps of a light knapsack, walked away down the road, alone and glad of it.

Nothing very much happened in the next two days, certainly nothing very dramatic. All I did was walk. I walked at my own leisurely pace, and I stopped whenever I wanted to—which was quite often.

A quarter-mile from my gate I paused beside an old house that, through my windshield, had always looked a mere out-of-place relic. Now, an inscription cut in its gray stonework opened up for me a new page of local history.

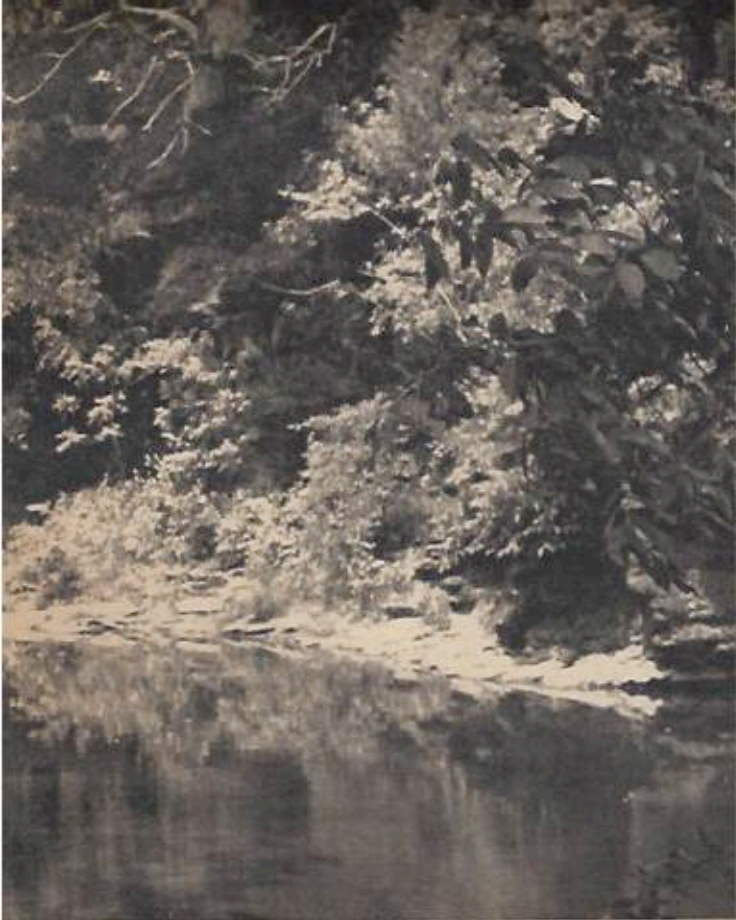
On the edge of town I leaned over a small bridge I'd driven across a hundred times and hardly noticed. Beneath the

bridge gurgled a creek. As I watched, a cigar-shaped shadow slid downstream and blended with a stone.

Soon I was out in rolling farmland. I found myself listening to the swish-swish of my boots as I angled across a stubble field, then to the scutter of small hooves on damp soil as I came around a thicket and surprised a flock of sheep. In the heat of the thirsty afternoon I stumbled on a little moss-covered spring, its clear water sparkling in the sun.

Most of Sunday I walked in wild hill country. Resting beside a creek, I watched a very large salamander climb laboriously to the top of a shelving rock, come face to face with a very small trout—and turn back. In a pine grove I found an orange fungus pushing up through dark soil, bearing on its plateau two pebbles and a little pyramid of earth with a crimson flower still growing from the apex. Later, sitting on a lonely hilltop, I traced different plow patterns in a dozen fields, meditated on the smog over nearby cities and the clarity over distant mountain masses.

By the time I turned the key in my front door that evening, I felt at peace with the



WALKING CANE

stretches the legs and clears the mind

world. The tensions of 48 hours earlier were a bad memory. The problems that had blocked my horizons had shrunk to the molehills they really were. Next morning, I disposed of them with calm and ease.

Since that weekend, I have always known what to do when I find, as most of us do at times, that I'm beginning to wilt beneath stress and strain: for two or three days I use only man's natural means of locomotion. In my three-mile-an-hour world of simple pleasures I soon "get away from it all."

I do not always leave the house on foot. Sometimes I scan a road map—the kind you can pick up at any gas station—and look for big, road-free spaces. I choose one that intrigues me. Then I drive to the edge of it, park the car, and walk in. The trip need not occupy a weekend. It can take an hour or an afternoon—or a week.

YOU NEED an objective—because that takes care of where you go; reaching it is not essential. I have aimed for prominent hilltops, for villages I don't know, and for the seashore—a two-day ramble from my home. Once, a friend and I climbed the "unknown" side of a mountain we'd often driven up. When we at last gained the paved viewpoint at the summit, we both felt genuinely sorry for the poor people who had used their cars.

I cut my load to the bone. Extra pounds can turn a pleasant stroll into a backbreaking, blister-ridden chore. I take only such dehydrated foods as powdered milk and

Continued on page 46



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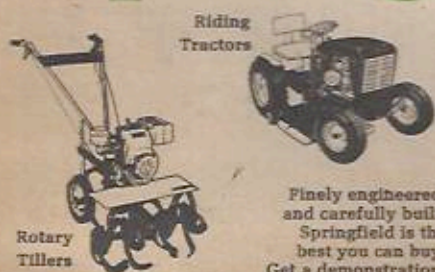
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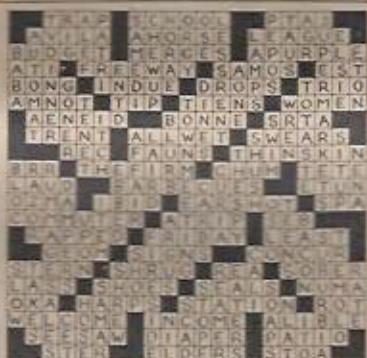
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Walking

Continued from page 33

soups, meat concentrates, instant potato, and tea bags. For cooking, I carry a tiny gasoline-burning pressure stove.

In bad weather I may put up for the night at a motel, but I much prefer just to roll out my sleeping bag at a convenient spot. Sometimes I open my eyes in the morning to see a rabbit bobbing and nibbling his way through breakfast. Once I woke at dawn to find, 10 feet from my head, a doe browsing among dew-covered ferns.

And the days go on the same way. I lunch beside a frog as he drowns away his noon on a midstream stone. I watch a turtle investigating the secrets of an underwater rock. I drop down into fields, and from a rich-smelling farmyard there erupt toward me a posse of clean brown chickens, hopeful for grain.

AFTER A WEEKEND of walking, I am happy in the knowledge that I have traveled with all five senses alert. I remember catching the scent of wild strawberries as I forded a tinkling creek; I recall their velvet sweetness on my tongue as I leaned against rough, sun-warmed granite. I am tired with the satisfying tiredness that comes after a long tramp—as far removed from the exhaustion after a day's drive as a waltz is from St. Vitus's dance. Finally there are the amplified pleasures. In everyday life, taking off your socks is an unnoticed chore; peeling them off after a day's walk is sheer delight. And no caviar ever tasted better than my pemmican and dehydrated potatoes.

But you do not have to tramp 20 miles to re-discover the lost art of walking. Not long ago I suggested to a stenographer friend that instead of driving six blocks to buy low-calorie food she should walk to the store—and then walk back empty-handed. As a joke, she did. Now she has given up strict dieting, walks short distances whenever she can, and is both slimmer and fitter.

Another friend, a tool-and-die maker who knows his own mind, sold his car after a disagreement with an insurance company. He be-

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gain walking to the factory to theaters, to the ball game. Soon afterward he told me, "In the past month I've found out more about this town than I've learned in years: kids in the park, little side streets I'd never noticed before, and all kinds of people I just happen to talk to. I've even found myself dropping into the library as I pass, and that's something I'd never done before."

For short walks, I find hilltops attract me—and evenings, too. Hilltops have an allure all their own, especially on those magically clear days when you feel you could reach out and put your finger on every leaf within miles; but climbing to a high place on almost any day is enough to widen your horizons, lift you above pettiness, and reveal lines of action rarely glimpsed in the ruck of everyday living. Dusk, I find, is a time for grasping the simple, difficult truths.

There is something about a traveler on foot that tends to warm the heart of strangers. They keep telling me of "better" roads to follow. Most people are frankly envious. A surprising number say, "All my life I've wanted to do the kind of thing you're doing—just get away from it all and walk."

TODAY, more and more Americans are discovering the joys of wilderness walking. The Appalachian Trail that runs 2,000 miles from Maine to Georgia can be followed only on foot, and last summer 35% more people used the huts along it than in any previous year. On a recent two-week trip of San Francisco's Sierra Club in the Wyoming Rockies—almost all above 9,000 feet—the ages ranged from seven to 70. By carrying the heavy duffel on pack horses, the club brings the purity of mountain peaks and the glory of glaciers within reach of whole families who could not possibly manage such trips alone.

An increasing number of doctors nowadays advise their patients to do more walking. Only this afternoon I heard a radio plea by the California Heart Association: "We Americans are sitting pretty—too pretty. The heart's a muscle and needs exercise. Try a walk this evening . . ."

Today, it is fashionable to blame the automobile for what has been called "the progressive atrophy of our legs." But the decline began long before Henry Ford. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "The civilized man has built a coach, but he has lost the use of his feet."

WE HAVE now moved far beyond the coach. Not long ago, a young man at a cocktail party boasted to me that he had just completed a round-the-world sight-seeing tour in 79 days. In a single jet-streamed breath he scuttled from St. Peter's, Rome, via the pyramids, to a Cambodian jungle temple. "That's the way to travel," he said. "You see everything important."

When I suggested that the way to see important things was to walk, he nearly dropped his martini.

There is a difference between "getting somewhere" and "going." When I want to "get somewhere," I buy an airline ticket. But if I want the joy of "going," I walk. When the press of day-to-day problems threatens to swamp me, I lock the garage and devote two or three days to using my legs for their rightful purpose of locomotion. And always, when I come home, I find I have rediscovered the secret of happiness.

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