

Hudson

JULY 2010 • \$2.00

Monthly

Blazing a Trail

Former Hudsonite writes book on backpacking and hiking.

INSIDE: Letter from the editor • Meet Gail and Nancy • Society Scene



Hudson *Monthly*

Vol. 11, Issue 11
July 2010

1619 Commerce Drive,
Stow, OH 44224
Email: sfellenstein@recordpub.com
www.recordpub.com
Fax: 330-688-1588
Phone: 330-688-0088

EDITOR
Stephanie Fellenstein
ext. 3163

STAFF PHOTOGRAPHERS
Steph Krell
Robert J. Lucas

HUDSON HUB-TIMES
EDITOR
Bill Hammerstrom
ext. 3144

CONTRIBUTING
WRITERS
Michele Kisthardt
Jacquie Mazziotta

For more information
about display
advertising, contact
Harry Newman
ext. 1232

For additional copies or
subscriptions, contact
Margaret Gotschall
ext. 3104

Hudson Monthly is published 12 times a year by Record Publishing Co., David E. Dix—Publisher, Richard M. Sekella—General Manager, 126 N. Chestnut St., Ravenna, Ohio 44266. It is included once per month with the carrier-delivered Hudson Hub-Times. Mail subscriptions are available for \$36 per year. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without written permission of the Record Publishing Co., L.L.C.

July 2010



On The Cover: Jason Stevenson, a 1996 Hudson graduate, recently wrote a book on hiking and backpacking. Photo Special to Hudson Monthly

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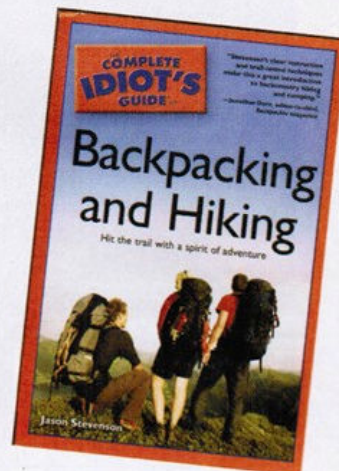
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Hudson Monthly welcomes letters to the editor. Please address correspondence to *Hudson Monthly*, 1619 Commerce Drive, Stow 44224, and include your signature and daytime phone number. Or e-mail us at sfellenstein@recordpub.com or fax us at 330-688-1588. We reserve the right to edit letters for length and content.



The path less traveled

by Stephanie Fellenstein
Photos Special to Hudson Monthly

When it comes to backpacking and hiking, 1996 Hudson High School graduate Jason Stevenson knows what he's talking about.

And he wrote a book to prove it.

Released in April, "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Backpacking and Hiking" offers the beginning backpacker tips on trail safety, efficient packing and camping.

Gathering the essentials

Stevenson's path to writing resembles the twisting mountain trails he loves to explore.

When he left his Clairhaven Drive home in Hudson, writing a book about backpacking was not even on his radar.

In fact, he earned his bachelor's degree in social studies from Harvard University.

"I know it sounds like what you study in fourth grade — where corn grows and rivers ... No, I didn't spend all my time coloring and tracing the Mississippi River," he says, laughing. "It is actually political theory, political

science and history all mixed together."

While history was his main focus, he also took education, urban economics and military history classes. As varying as the topics were, Stevenson actually found a way to work them all into his life.

Take military history for instance.

After graduating from Har-

Jackie Rohrer and Jason Stevenson during a backpacking trip to Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park in California.

vard, Stevenson won a fellowship to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland where he earned a master's degree in modern British history, studying British battle ships of the Royal Navy.

"Living abroad was great," he says. "I did a lot of traveling and hiking."

And then, when he returned to Boston, he mixed in a little urban economics.

"After I graduated from Harvard, before I knew I had won the fellowship, I was applying for jobs," Stevenson says.

He was hired by the Initiative for Competitive Inner City and worked for that the summer before he headed to Scotland. "My job was waiting for me when I returned."

Blazing a trail

Meanwhile, hiking and backpacking were beginning to play a bigger role in Stevenson's life.

"Hiking is always one of those things you can come back to. This is something I really believe and I mention it in the book," he says. "There are certain periods in life when you can do a lot depending on your location."

Boston proved to be ideal for hiking. "I did a big trip my freshman year at Harvard," he says. "It was an outdoor program to help ease the freshmen into the college experience. Eight of us spent a week hiking on the Appalachian Trail in Maine."

When Stevenson returned from Scotland, he joined the Appalachian Mountain Club. "It was great for someone like me. I was 22 or 23, had no car, but was interested in hiking. We car pooled and hiked pieces of the Appalachian Trail."

Just as hiking was becoming a focal point in Stevenson's life, he met his fu-

ture wife, Jackie Rohrer. Rohrer, originally from Bath, is now in her second year of a three-year family medicine residency program in Lancaster, Pa.

Hiking and backpacking have been a part of their relationship from the beginning, Stevenson says.

"On early dates we would go hiking or camping. She is a trooper," he says. "In my book I'm constantly saying, 'in this other time I almost killed my wife. ...' She's almost a character in the book."

Rohrer, on a break at the hospital, laughs when she thinks back on some of their adventures, like the time they camped at the base of Mount Rainier and woke up to six inches of snow.

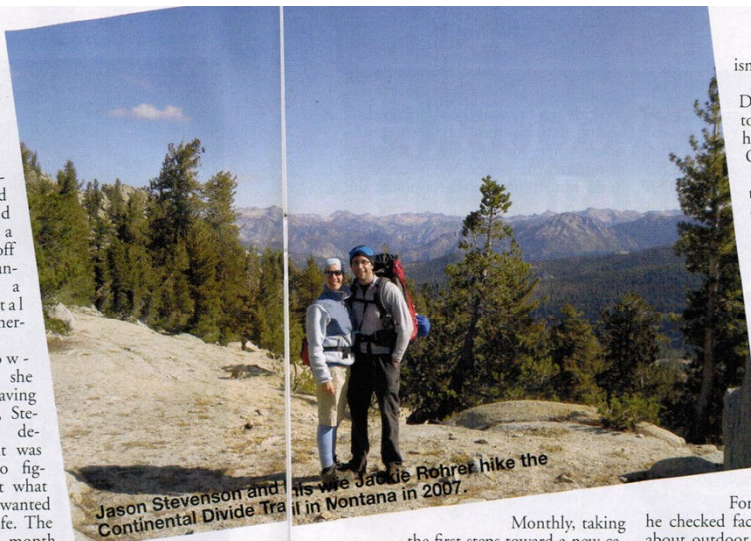
On another backpacking trip in Pennsylvania, Stevenson and Rohrer were hiking 17 miles in two days. "That is a lot for me," Rohrer says. "The morning of the second day, I slipped on a rock and had to get three stitches. It was our first experience where I thought, 'wow, you can actually get hurt out there.'"

She went home and tried to replace their small first-aid kit with a more comprehensive kit, but "Jason said it was too heavy," she says.

After dating for about seven months, Rohrer was accepted into McGill Uni-

versity in Montreal for medical school. She decided to take a year off to volunteer at a hospital in Cameroon. Now she was leaving Boston, Stevenson decided it was time to figure out what he wanted from life. The same month Jackie moved to Cameroon, Washington, D.C., where he worked as an unpaid intern for the Washington

Monthly, taking the first steps toward a new career in journalism. "I was 24 or 25, trying to do the same job as college sophomores," he says. "I realized I didn't like political journal-



Jason Stevenson and his wife Jackie Rohrer hike the Continental Divide Trail in Montana in 2007.

ism."

From Washington, D.C., Stevenson headed to Santa Fe, N.M., where he worked as an intern for Outside magazine.

"I bought a one-way ticket and took two suitcases," he says. "The first day I bought a mountain bike and found an apartment. It was a wonderful internship program. It was the training ground I needed for magazine journalism."

Four or five months after Stevenson arrived, a research editor ended up leaving and he moved into an associate editor position.

For the next two years, he checked facts, called sources, wrote about outdoor stuff and explored New Mexico. He even founded the High Points New Mexico Club, a hiking group. "We were blessed to have tremendous national parks and forests," he

says. "I needed people to go hiking with me."

With immediate access to the newest gear and backpacking experts, Stevenson says he got into it so much that when he looked for his next job, he found Backpacker magazine.

"That was my first drive across the country to Emmaus, Pa.," he says.

At this point, Jackie was in medical school in Montreal. Backpacker was sold and the company moved to Boulder, Colo. Stevenson moved to Colorado and stayed with the magazine through the transition.

"When Jackie graduated, we had had enough of the long distance," he says.

They were married at Hale Farm and Village in May 2008 and moved to Lancaster, Pa., so Jackie could begin her residency.

"I really wanted to start a book project at that point," Stevenson says, adding that at the same time Alpha, the publisher of the "Complete Idiots Guide" books, contacted Backpacker magazine about doing a book on backpacking. "Backpacker referred them to me. The deadline was really tight."

Stevenson began the book in May 2009 and was finished by October. "I



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did a sample chapter, they approved it and then I did a table of contents. I wrote about 5,000 words a week. I broke it into pieces and marched through it.”

A chapter on first aid — chapter 17 — is one of his favorites. “You could really get into the idea that this chapter will help people.”

With only 5,000 words to work with, Stevenson had to whittle down the 15,000 words he originally wrote.

“Do I write about concussions, broken arms ... I did a lot of research to find out what happens more to people on the trail.”

The chapter that proved most complicated involved food and water, Stevenson says.

“I really wanted to give solid advice on what to bring and how much to bring,” he says. “People get really anxious about getting sick when they’re outdoors. I had to do a lot of interviews to make

sure the information was accurate. I had to create charts so they could see, for example, that a filter will keep a virus from getting through. I was giving the readers an authoritative checklist. This is the one stop for what they need. That was a challenge.”

Rohrer, who watched the whole writing process, says she thinks the book is wonderful.

“It’s impressive the amount of knowledge he has on the subject. The quips are pretty entertaining. I really hear his voice coming through the writing.”

While most of last summer was spent writing about hiking and backpacking instead of actually doing it, Jason and Jackie celebrated the finished book with a backpacking trip to Sequoia and King’s Canyon National Park in California.

With the book finished, they also traveled to Tanzania for five weeks. “My wife had an away elective and was able

to work at a hospital there,” Jason says, adding that his aunt has been a missionary there for 30 years. “I did a lot of research for stories. We might want to do something like that again in the future.”

In the meantime, Stevenson is contemplating his next book.

“I would love to get back into naval history. I’d like to research some story that hasn’t been told yet. Kind of like the research I did for my master’s degree.”

No matter what he does next, life in Hudson — from Cub Scout Pack 3321 to Boy Scout Troop 333 — laid the foundation for Stevenson’s future.

“We were sleeping in tents, earning merit badges, going to camp and I learned how to tie knots,” he says. “Boy Scouting taught us a little bit about leadership.”

And now Stevenson is sharing that knowledge with others. ♦

Jason Stevenson in Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park.

Trail Tips

Looking to head out for a backpacking adventure? Grab a copy of “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Backpacking and Hiking” by Jason Stevenson.

For those interested in hiking close to home, Stevenson suggests the Dolly Sods Wilderness in West Virginia. “On the west side of the Appalachian Ridge, it is not huge, but you can really do some great backpacking. There is great mountainous terrain. It is really a backpacking/hiking paradise.”

Those interested in leaving Ohio should head to Glacier National Park in Montana, Stevenson says.

“I have never been there,” he says, “but folks I worked with at Backpacker said it is one of the best. There is so much to see and the trails are well marked. There are also grizzly bears, which makes things exciting.”

The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Backpacking and Hiking is available at The Learned Owl Book Shop.