From Buckskin to Gore-Tex: Consumption as a Path to Mastery in Twentieth-Century American Wilderness Recreation

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No escape to nature is complete without a trip to the store. Or so suggest the purchases of tens of millions of American outdoor enthusiasts in recent decades. Since the late nineteenth century, the outdoor industry has played a central role in mediating Americans' back-to-nature experiences. Consumers have filled their packs and cars with camping stoves and sleeping bags in an effort to stay warm, comfortable, and, most importantly, have an authentic experience out in nature. In 2017 Americans spent $887 billion in the outdoor recreation economy, topping even consumer spending on pharmaceuticals.[1] Though the items that customers purchase might differ if they frequent a hunting and fishing store like Cabela's or the climbing section of Patagonia, store visitors share a common assumption about American outdoor recreation that has been around for more than 100 years: to get to the wilderness, start at the store.

From Buckskin to Gore-Tex asks why Americans go shopping on their way to the wilderness. In the late nineteenth century, American travelers saw their excursions to the mountains as emblems of antimodern, or primitive, experiences, even as they brought modern equipment from outfitters like Abercrombie & Fitch with them from the city.[2] The symbolic significance of nature defined in opposition to

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1. "The Outdoor Recreation Economy," Outdoor Industry Association, Boulder, CO, 2017, https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA_RecEconomy_FINAL_Single.pdf.

2. Historians have long contributed to the critique of popular conceptions of wilderness as a place apart from modern life. William Cronon's 1995 essay helped to define the terms of this critique for many environmental historians. Cronon, "Trouble With Wilderness."

modernity remained for the next 150 years. Nonetheless, thoroughly modern outdoor companies such as L. L. Bean and Eddie Bauer have played a central role in shaping travelers' material experiences and their ideas about the nature they were getting back to. The project traces the history of the outdoor industry from the Civil War to the present, or from buckskin to Gore-Tex.

While the irony of setting foot in outdoor stores to equip for wild nature has not been lost on historians, few have delved deeply into the mental, cultural, and material work that created the outdoor industry that Americans have come to rely on. Environmental historians have queried the meanings of nature through literature, politics, and tourism, but are only beginning to examine the role of consumer culture in shaping popular ideas and material experiences of nature.[3] My dissertation shows how central commerce is to American experiences of the outdoors. To explore how selling nature experiences is, in fact, a business, this project also draws on fashion and business historians who argue that everyday attire is as important as designers and elite brands.[4] This is the first history of the American outdoor industry, the first to take seriously the tents and jackets that millions of Americans bought for their leisure activities. This project also traces the history of one of the most popular styles of contemporary dress in America by linking the origins of sportswear and outdoor wear in everyday life to the early outdoor outfitters who promoted the trend. Ultimately, this project shows that even for a noncamper, the business of outdoor recreation touches everyday American life in myriad ways.

From Buckskin to Gore-Tex traces the evolution of outdoor recreation and its attendant industry from infancy to full-blown economic force of the twenty-first century. In the late nineteenth century, there were only a few companies that catered to the narrow set of outdoor recreationists in the United States. Aspiring outdoorspeople ordered goods from Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalogs; wore and used their everyday clothing and equipment; or—for the wealthiest—had a tailor custom-make an outfit for the trail. Accompanying this approach to purchasing for outdoor recreation was the concept of

3. Environmental historians are among those who have examined the consumer culture of nature. See Sutter, *Driven Wild*; Chamberlin, *On the Trail*; Simon and Alagona, "Confluence of Commerce, Consumption, and Conservation"; Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*; Kropp, "Wilderness Wives and Dishwashing Husbands"; Turner, "Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism"; Young, *Heading Out*.

4. For business histories of dress, see Blaszczyk, "Rethinking Fashion"; Blaszczyk, "Styling Synthetics"; Scott, "California Casual"; O'Connor, *How a Fiber Shaped America*. Fashion history has seen some excellent recent additions that use clothing to explore race, gender, and the development of political subjectivities. See Ford, *Liberated Threads*; Le Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge*; Clemente, *Dress Casual*.

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woodcraft, promoted by guides and participants alike, that a true outdoorsmen would buy little and rely instead on his own skill to survive in the woods.

By the turn of the twentieth century, both this attitude about self-sufficiency and the material goods of recreation had shifted as outdoor companies contributed to the building of a new mass consumer culture. Businesses played a role in the imaginary travels people took while immersing themselves in the "wilderness" of an outfitter catalog, showing how marketers sold ideas about nature just as much as they sold products. Outdoorspeople turned to outfitters to prepare for adventure and started to believe that to participate correctly and safely in these activities, what they purchased was just as important as the skills they brought with them. Throughout the twentieth century, new companies grew to meet the demands of American leisure-seekers with more and more disposable income to spend on boots and tents for vacations. From New York City to Portland, Oregon, outdoor companies served this new demographic of outdoor enthusiasts, contributing along the way to the notion that Americans could buy their way to outdoor expertise and a successful trip.

Guidebook authors, outdoor companies, and travelers alike debated the right way to develop this expertise, a process I call the path to mastery. The concept of mastery they developed reflected a deeply held anxiety about consumption: mastery was not just about going light but also buying right. Describing a master of the outdoors at the turn of the century, Horace Kephart, author of the famed *Camping and Woodcraft* (1906), explained, "An old campaigner is known by the simplicity and fitness of his equipment. He carries few impedimenta, but every article has been well tested and it is the best that his purse can afford."[5] Mastery, for Kephart, was selecting the best available equipment and crafting other necessities by hand. The next 100 years of outdoor guidebooks and catalogs suggest that Kephart was not alone in looking to consumer goods—or a rejection of those goods—to affirm a mastery of the outdoors.

Hikers lived in a world with inconsistent and conflicting ideas about how the body should appropriately exist in nature, particularly within a recreational setting. In *Buckskin to Gore-Tex*, mastery represents the larger process by which people learned what they were supposed to do in outdoor sports. Using the cultural reference points of each era—guidebooks, peer advice, and their own experiences—they attempted to master their generation's craft of hiking: where to go and what to wear. Hikers spoke of the values of their generation even as guidebooks and equipment catalogs were challenging and

5. Kephart, *Book of Camping and Woodcraft*, 23.

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transforming these values. The badges, hallmarks, and material manifestations of the niche culture's "insider" vocabulary evolved rapidly. Outdoorspeople gradually learned to have the right materials, to situate themselves on the spectrum from beginner to expert, and to make a statement about themselves to the group to which they hoped to belong. Finding the right information—by reading catalogs, by walking the right store aisles and analyzing the shelves, by discussing and participating with others—offered a process through which newcomers could learn to increase their tolerance for risk and participate in dangerous activities safely. Mastery became the combination of reading the right information, performing correctly on the trail, and then describing adventures with the right vocabulary afterward. As the channels of information, such as catalogs and backpacking stores, kept evolving, so too did the rules about how to look and act like a master.

The dissertation traces outdoor recreation from the years after the Civil War to the end of the twentieth century over seven chronological chapters. Entrepreneurs, companies, the military, and outdoorspeople themselves shaped the world of mass-produced goods that mediate how Americans know nature through leisure. More than a century ago, outdoor outfitter Abercrombie & Fitch referred to its Manhattan headquarters as the place where "the blazed trail crosses the boulevard."[6] Since that time, the trails that mark human recreation in the wild have crossed the boulevards of commerce, technology, science, and innovation many times. For that reason, while I take readers to national parks and on tourists' explorations, I spend just as much time paging through catalogs, browsing inventory on shelves, examining laboratory experiments, and joining military expeditions. I meditate on kiddie packs, copper manikins outfitted with hot plates, and the merits of cotton mesh versus polypropylene long underwear in order to show how Americans made consuming a central step on their path to knowing the outdoors through leisure.

Chapter 1 uses prescriptive literature such as guidebooks to explore the role of outdoor clothing and equipment in the late nineteenth century, before the growth of the outdoor industry. For adventure and travel writer Stewart Edward White, for example, there was a physical place that marked the transition from city to trail, from the trappings of modern, urban existence to the primitive wilderness. He called this place "the jumping-off place," and suggested its power lay in both its geographical proximity to the woods and in its emotional impact on the woodsman. The jumping-off place served as a symbol of the

6. Abercrombie & Fitch, catalog, 1922, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington, DC.

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complicated relationship to modern material objects at the center of the back-to-nature enterprise. Here, wrote White in *The Forest* (1903), "you loose your hold on the world of made things."[7] The comparison between the artificial world of manufactured objects and the primeval and unchanging wilderness gets at the heart of what Americans were looking for in heading back to nature: an escape from modern life. According to outdoor guidebooks, mastery was not something you could buy at a store but rather something that had to be cultivated and nurtured through the practice of woodcraft.

By the turn of the twentieth century, outdoor companies began to respond to the growing market for outdoor wear for leisure activities. No need to wait for an endorsement from an author like White. Instead, company catalogs created their own copy that instructed readers on the practice of the outdoors. As Chapter 2 argues, these companies presented their stores on the boulevard as a necessary first stop on the road to the blazed trail. Outdoor experiences in the early twentieth century were embedded in commercial interactions. Manufacturers of clothing and equipment took their place alongside famous explorers as the nation's foremost experts on extreme environments and human bodies' safety, survival, and comfort in them. Through catalogs, advertisements, and creative in-store environments, L. L. Bean, David T. Abercrombie, Eddie Bauer, and other outdoor company owners established their authority, trademarked their brands, and marketed their products. Outdoor magazines and guidebooks in the booming outing press confirmed their knowledge. The link between the blazed trail and the boulevard was firmly in place.

For many leisure-seeking Americans through the 1930s, the outdoor industry represented an escape from the travails of modern life. With the attack on Pearl Harbor in November 1941, however, the outdoor industry became a "war industry."[8] Chapter 3 traces the U.S. military's development and testing of new cold-weather uniforms that drew on the long-standing lessons from outdoor sports. Together, outdoor outfitters, expert mountaineers, and physiologists worked to transform the Quartermaster Corps' approach to equipping soldiers for cold from an art to a science. Between 1941 and 1945, the Quartermaster Corps organized expeditions to the tallest mountains in the United States, built sealed rooms that mimicked arctic winds and jungle heat, and taught hundreds of thousands of soldiers how to wear clothes. Ultimately, the logistics branch of the army helped

7. White, *The Forest*, 23–31.

8. Harold S. Hirsch, interview by Helene Hirsch Oppenheimer, 1988–1989, manuscript, 161, SR 2831, Oregon Historical Society, Portland, OR.

popularize functional clothing and reshaped popular and corporate perceptions of how bodies should manage the cold.[9]

After the war, there was a wealth of battle-proven gear available at low cost at military surplus stores all over the United States. Chapter 4 explores the role of army surplus in outdoor recreation in the years after World War II. For outdoorspeople, army surplus clothing and equipment seemed to be the answer to authentic, informed consumption. I show how consumers of surplus contributed to the contemporary understandings of outdoor clothing and equipment as exempt from ordinary critiques of mass consumer culture. American consumers often bought surplus because it reflected the values of selective consumption, frugality, and especially authentic manhood that they had come to associate with outdoor recreation. The link between surplus and the military only enhanced these associative values. Consumers prized the low cost of surplus. Nonetheless, the discomfort that surplus's heavy weight caused inspired many to tinker away in basements and garages looking for improvements. Profits from reselling surplus military equipment and clothing gave business owners the means and motivation to develop better equipment. For instance, LeRoy Holubar, along with Alice, his wife, were Boulder, Colorado-based surplus resellers who turned that work into a family hobby, and then into an international business renowned for high-end mountaineering equipment.

Chapter 5 traces Holubar Mountaineering cofounder Alice Holubar's role as an outdoor industry leader in the postwar era. The gear that company owners like Holubar designed and sold helped transform outdoor goods from personal luxuries to investments in family life. Marketers presented these purchases as crucial for upholding American values and, therefore, were immune to critiques of consumption. Alice Holubar's example is an entrée into how millions of participants embraced a mass consumer culture phenomenon as "non-commercial."[10] Even as Holubar and other women had a central role in building these companies, making gear, and participating in outdoor sports, companies and consumers built a leisure culture that both affirmed the outdoors as a male space and gave moral permission for unbridled consumption. The Holubars' family-oriented, noncommercial feel made men more comfortable participating in an

9. For more on the military's scientization of dress during World War II, see Gross, "Layering for the Cold."

10. I draw the term noncommercial from "A Motivational Research Study of the Advertising, Editorial, and Promotional Opportunities and Problems of Outdoor Life Magazine," Institute for Motivational Research, Inc., February, 1959, 22, Folder 1032C, Box 47, Ernest Dichter Papers, Series I, Research Proposals and Reports (Accession 2407A), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

otherwise feminized culture of mass consumption in the postwar era. Ironically, this helped men reinforce their roles as heads of the household in both the home and in the wilderness. Ultimately, outdoor outfitters helped confirm camping equipment as emblems of masculine expertise.

Outdoor companies like Holubar Mountaineering and the Co-op (Recreational Equipment, Incorporated) of the 1950s gained a following through gearmakers' personal connections with outdoor clubs and fellow athletes. The following generation of gear companies, founded in the 1960s and 1970s, found new ways to sell authenticity and expertise. Chapter 6 shows how consumers and marketers alike engaged in a contest over the meaning of brands and company identities. As consumption became evermore a public and visible declaration of identity, the values that outdoor companies stood for became more fraught. Outdoor companies capitalized on the selling of the outdoor lifestyle to white, middle-class Americans, even those who did not participate in outdoor sports. Marketers worried, however, that as more Americans turned to outdoor products for everyday use rather than for excursions to the wilderness, they diluted the power of the brand. Outdoorspeople, for their part, worried that beginners and style-oriented customers diluted the identity of the authentic, masterful outdoorsperson they were purchasing through their outdoor wear. Consumers continued to develop relationships with companies through stores and catalogs, but in the end the branded goods anchored the relationship between consumers and company. Outdoor companies argued through advertisements, outreach, and the goods themselves that nature was a leisure space defined by technology and consumption.

By the mid-1980s, an alphabet soup of trademarked goods dominated outdoorspeople's packing lists, like DuPont's Hollofil, Quallofil, and Sontique polyester fiberfill insulation and 3M's Thinsulate insulation. Chemical companies and consumers together built a new outdoor tradition of high-tech nature that changed the skills needed to survive and thrive outdoors. Outdoor experts gradually began to recommend man-made synthetic fibers—as opposed to natural fibers like cotton and wool—as the best choice for getting back to nature safely and comfortably. Packing lists, now populated with mouthfuls like Celanese Fortrel PolarGuard polyester fiberfill insulation, would never be the same. No material better exemplifies both the promise of high-tech and the threat to older forms of mastery than Gore-Tex. Marketers heralded the waterproof, breathable laminate as a miracle for bodily comfort, while traditionalists viewed Gore-Tex both as a dangerous shortcut to time-honored techniques and as too expensive to be accessible to ordinary outdoorspeople. To understand how

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synthetics became central to mastering nature despite these critiques, Chapter 6 looks to the scientists and marketers who sold comfort, high performance, and safety in new materials. Peeling back the outer layer of fabric on jackets reveals the crepe-paper-thin waterproofing sheets within that consumers sensed but never saw. The technical and social history of synthetics is crucial to showing that the sensations Americans had when they wore clothes in the world were both materially constituted by technology and shaped by culture.

The desire for mastery has remained a consistent part of the back-to-nature experience through the twenty-first century, even as industrial production shifted just what exactly was included on packing lists for outdoor adventures. The central irony of escaping the world of made things by first heading to a store remains and mastery continues to be something purchasable. For many outdoorspeople, mastery of equipment, of nature, and of self continue to be admirable goals. Materials change, but the expectation that the user will know why a given material is special and how it works persists. Mastery remains vetted by experts, although they have shifted to include not just explorers and guidebook authors but also outfitters, soldiers, and professional athletes. As much as consumers seek out gear endorsements from these experts, many still adhere to the maxims of nineteenth-century guidebook authors: only through personal experience can someone truly assess what is necessary and what is not. Only through the trial and error of woodcraft can an aspiring woodsman—and now woodswoman—attain the self-assuredness on the trail that defines mastery.

Narrating the developing of the outdoor industry in the United States from buckskin to Gore-Tex shows that the cultures associated with outdoor recreation are anything but natural. Participants in outdoor sports continue to grapple with the tension between consumption and their ideas of a pristine wilderness. They remain unsatisfied with consumerism as an identity marker for backpackers or hikers and yet continue to purchase and wear the very Gore-Tex jackets that were scorned by earlier generations. As the inventory on outdoor store shelves cycles, the paths to mastery of outdoor recreation shift in tandem to reveal a two-way path between the seemingly mundane material of everyday life and constructions of American identity.

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