

Edward Payson Weston

by
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Edward Payson Weston, born in Providence, Rhode Island, on March 15, 1839, first won notice as an athlete in 1861 when he undertook to walk from Boston to Washington within ten days. For nearly seventy-five years he continued to win attention in the sports headlines; and upon his death in May 1929 at the age ninety, he was saluted by newspapers throughout the country and abroad.

From the start of his career as an athlete Weston combined his ability as a walker with a special talent for winning attention and gaining publicity. His initial effort was linked to President Lincoln's inauguration, ostensibly as payment for an election wager.

After service in the Union army, Weston was employed briefly as a reporter for the *New York Herald* but soon returned to the sports headlines with the announcement that he was to walk from Portland, Maine, to Chicago within twenty-six walking days. Two backers had wagered ten thousand dollars each on the event. It was a grand promotion. Handbills were printed, pamphlets containing a timetable of his itinerary were sold; and newspaper stories were widely distributed. By the time that Weston started his journey, the excitement was intense. When he reached the outskirts of a town or city along the route, he was met by bands and thousands of cheering spectators. His arrival in Chicago was a major event; his reputation as a walker was assured.

For the next few years Weston performed as a professional walker, giving exhibitions, walking for records against time; but for the most part avoiding challenges from other walkers. He was finally goaded into a match with Chicago's Daniel O'Leary and lost. At this point he went to England, where he remained for several years, winning wide popularity and claiming many long distance records.

Toward the end of 1870's professional walking had reached the mania stage which culminated in international matches for the Astley Belt. These contests were for 142 consecutive hours of running or walking and were known as Six Days Go-As-You-Please contests. In the first contest which was staged in England between Weston and O'Leary, the latter was the winner. In the second contest held in New York City, the Englishman Charles Rowell won the belt, only to lose it to Weston before the year was out. Weston returned to New York City to defend the belt, failing in this effort.

He then returned to England and for a number of years claimed records for various distances and performed exhibitions. A total abstinence man, Weston often walked under the sponsorship of a temperance society.

His walking career extended into the twentieth century. At the age of seventy he successfully completed a trans-continental walk; and at seventy-five he walked from New York City to Minneapolis.

Throughout his career Weston won wide recognition and acclaim for his walking feats; but his record was not without controversy. While the general newspapers heaped praise upon him and regarded him as the greatest walker of all times, certain sporting publications treated him with scorn for his reluctance to accept challenges from individuals for personal encounters. Most of the records he claimed were for contests against the clock or calendar. Most agreed, however, that his performances coupled with his promotional antics helped substantially to popularize athletics.