

43: Walking Backwards Around the World – Part 6

Davy Crockett

Published 2020-01-03 | Updated 2023-11-12

<https://ultrarunninghistory.com/walking-backwards/>

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By Davy Crockett



Attempts to walk backwards for ultra-distances has taken place for more than two centuries. Why? One backwards walker once said, "With the whole world going backwards, maybe the only way to see it is to turn around." Obviously, such attempts caused a stir of attention. Common comments heard around these individuals were, "What is that fool doing?" and "When did he get out of the asylum?" In recent years some have actually encouraged the practice as a way to burn more calories, sharpen senses, train your peripheral vision, and improve balance. But walking backwards for hundreds and thousands of miles is simply bizarre. Let's first take a look at the very early history of walking backwards for ultra-distances and then examine the stories of attempts to walk backwards across America and around the world.

Get Davy Crockett's new book, *Strange Running Tales: When Ultrarunning was a Reality Show*

Early backwards walking

On July 11, 1817, at Wormwood Scrubbs, England, Darby Stevens started to walk backwards for 500 miles in 20 days on a wager for 50 guineas. "A line is laid along the ground which is 200 yards in length, and which he takes hold of when he deems necessary." It is unknown if he was successful.

The next day Daniel Crisp of Paddington, England took his place at the same location without the aid of a rope and walked 280 miles backwards in only seven days. A newspaper editorialized, "We have reason to believe that the idle scene of walking backwards, which continues to disgrace even Wormwood Scrubs, is encouraged for the very worst purposes and the public disgust will be still more excited, when we state that it is meant to continue these vicious scenes throughout the whole of the summer. Another of these reprehensible matches is already determined upon."

In 1821 on a road near Bath, England, John Townsend walked 21 miles backward in 6:45. In 1822 he walked backwards 38 miles in 12 hours for three successive days. "This arduous task he performed, and won in great style, amidst the acclamation of a great number of spectators."

Townsend really stepped up his backward game in 1823 when he walked 73 miles backward in 24 hours at Bristol, England on a mile out-and-back. "He commenced at midnight, a man preceded him with a lantern during the night." He started walking 15-minute miles and large betting took place. Later that year he broke his record with 74 miles. Also that year, Townsend walked backwards 64 miles per day for ten successive days at Ipswich, England.

In 1824, Richard Sutton walked backwards 250 miles in six days in Sydney Gardens, in Bath, England. During the Pedestrian heyday of the 1870s and 1880, several individuals claimed that they were the "champion backward walker" and many matches were held.

WALKED BACKWARDS INTO THE JAIL

In 1907, Paul Guavarra, a Spaniard who claimed to be a descendant of Christopher Columbus was arrested in New Jersey for walking backwards in houses to beg. He explained that he had been on the island of Marinique when Mount Pelee had blown up and “contracted the habit of going backwards because he didn’t dare turn his back to the volcano while he was running away from it. He walked backwards into the cell assigned him at the jail.”

Patrick Harmon – San Francisco to New York City

Patrick Harmon was born in 1865, in Ohio. By 1910 he was living in Great Falls, Montana working for the railroad. He also became a joint owner of Semaphore Cigar Shop at Great Falls. A new mayor was elected on an anti-gambling platform in 1913. Harmon’s place was scrutinized, and the law discovered that gambling was taking place in his establishment. It was raided and in October 1913, Harmon was arrested along with others, admitted that he had a card room, was found guilty and fined \$100. In early 1915 Harmon sold his ownership of the shop, moved to Seattle Washington, and started to experiment with backwards walking in the mountains. A farmer friend, William H. Baltazor (1870-1949) also moved to Seattle with him to start over after a nasty divorce.

Plans Backward Hike S. F. to New York

**Seattle Man Says Walk Is for \$20,-
000 Wager.**

On August 5, 1915, Harmon, age 50, started walking backwards from San Francisco, bound for New York City on an alleged \$20,000 wager between two parties. He needed to arrive in 260 days, in order to win. He left with his friend William Baltazor, who was to act as his guide, walking forwards and watching for obstructions in the roads, and supposedly making sure he covered every inch walking backwards. Baltazor would be paid four dollars per day for his services. Harmon said, "If I win, I get \$20,000. If I lose, I get nothing." Later he would say that his share of the winnings would be \$5,000.

Harmon said that while in a Seattle club, a friend complimented a man for walking into the city from the suburbs. Harmon declared that he could do it walking backwards. The discussion progressed to the wager.

Walk begins



postcard

Harmon began his backwards trip from the Panama-Pacific Exposition grounds at San Francisco. "Backing carefully along his road and watching his path behind him only by means of a small automobile mirror fastened to a rod and a bracket on his chest. He seized his stick and knapsack and started out." The two planned to average fifteen miles a day and raise money by selling postcards and selling subscriptions to a magazine.

On day four, Harmon was witnessed about 40 miles to the east, walking backward in Livermore Valley. "The first appearance of the walker in the distance was decidedly curious to the spectators. He carries a mirror attached by a spring in an ingenious way to his coat, which guides him somewhat in his freak undertaking."

At Stockton, California he arrived at the newspaper office walking forwards and was asked why. "He replied that he had arrived walking backwards, but he could turn about when he entered a store or office, while in the city."

Word of Harmon's stunt spread in the newspapers across America. "The latest freak stunt is to cross the country on foot, walking backwards with his seat to windward."



Harmon and Baltazor

On only day 57, they arrived more than 1,000 miles to the west, in Salt Lake City. That would be averaging more than 22 miles per walking day, climbing more than 35,000 feet along the way, likely into snow, and nearly all very rough dirt road on the Lincoln Highway with small towns very spread out. The only detail he shared was battling a rabid coyote at Woolsey, Nevada. There is a huge problem with that story. He claimed to walk the Lincoln Highway across Nevada, but the town of Woolsey wasn't on the Lincoln Highway, it was on the railway line, about 80 miles north of the Lincoln Highway. It is highly likely that they took train rides through this most difficult and slow stretch of the west. There were no newspaper stories about their arrivals in Nevada towns.

Harmon did not show any effects of the journey at Salt Lake City and put on backwards speed walking exhibitions at the Utah fairgrounds. He said he had developed very strong ankles and instep muscles and that "it would take a sledgehammer blow to sprain them."

IS BACKING UP ACROSS WHOLE OF CONTINENT

After four months, in December 1915, Harmon arrived at Kearney, Nebraska, after traveling more than 1,700 miles. With towns closer together he no longer had to camp out. He said he was averaging 18 miles per day, which does match closely the miles between towns with newspapers and a realistic pace. He said his best was a 26-mile day in Colorado. He explained that many times his companion took trains between towns to keep up.



During January in Iowa, people noticed that Harmon had frost bite on the tip of an ear and his nose, proof that he was really walking outdoors. He was on his 127th walking day out of 165 total days. He always took Sundays off. His best day was now 36 miles in Nebraska.

"Harmon was a locomotive engineer, a native of Cincinnati, Ohio. He is well educated, and while admitting that his test of endurance is a freakish one, he rather enjoys the novelty of it." At some point on the trip, his "watchman" became ill and it delayed them eleven days. At Cedar Rapids, Iowa on January 18th, he estimated his miles to be 2,500 which comes to about 18 miles per walking day.



As he went through towns, Harmon inspired others. At Creston, Iowa, two boys were discussing the performance of Harmon and a Sam Quitno made a boast to the village that he could walk a mile backwards in 15 minutes. He produced \$100 to back up his boast. A pool was raised, and the bet was made. "Sam got under headway spurred on by a good sized crowd and a fool editor or two. Some, who couldn't keep up with the fleet-footed human crawfish piled into vehicles, and an automobile loaded with the timers and stakeholders accompanied Sam the entire distance. The judges announced that he won with a time of 14:27."

On February 13, 1916, Harmon arrived in Chicago, Illinois. A motion picture company produced a film showing him arriving in the city. He started to call himself the "champion backwards walker of the world."

Near Pittsburgh in April, it was said, "they attracted a lot of attention as they hiked in over the Lincoln Highway, one of them walking backwards Both walkers were clad in drab colored walking suits, with leggings, and each one carried a canteen. They sold quite a lot of post cards while in the neighboring town." In Maryland it was reported that many "automobilists" had seen Harmon as he walked through the county

backwards.

Finishes in New York City

BACKWARD WALKER REACHES NEW YORK

Seattle Man Makes Pedes- trian Trip Across Con- tinent.

On May 22, 1916, a New York City newspaper reported, "Patrick Harmon of Seattle paraded up the steps of City Hall today walking backward, guiding himself by means of a reflector. While waiting to pay his respects to Mayor Mitchel, Harmon explained that he travelled 3,900 miles in 239 days." His total days were 291 days. His watchman, Baltazor said, "Harmon walked backwards every inch of the distance."

After his walk, Harmon went back to Seattle, Washington to live and work for the railroad. There was no news from Seattle if he won any prize. In 1917 it was discovered the Harmon's true name was Patrick O'Rourke who had been going by an alias for years, for some reason, and he was from St. Mary's Ohio.

**Patrick Harmon, who walked back-
ward from Seattle to New York be-
cause somebody said he couldn't do
it, is our idea of fine vice presidential
material. At least he has done some-
thing, even if he did do it backward,**

Did Harmon really walk backwards across the country every step? That is unlikely. He, like most of the transcontinental walkers of the time discovered the impossibility of walking through the rugged west of the

Sierra, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming without significant help. His pace was too fast to be believable and he detoured to the railroad route. He took rides. But in the populated areas of the Midwest and eastern United States, his pace was consistent and believable. His story published in local newspapers did not change, and there were witnesses that saw him out on the road. He was likely true to his quest through those states. But it is very unlikely that there was any wager involved. No valid wager would employ a close friend of the walker to confirm it.

His walk did cause very intense news coverage across America and likely did get the attention of future champion backwards walkers.

Jackson Corwin – Philadelphia to San Francisco

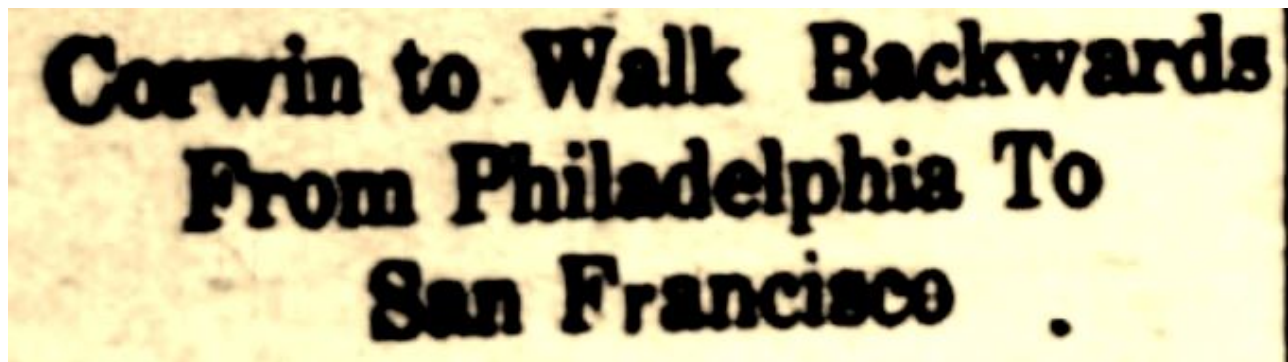


Jackson Corwin on left walking backwards with his secretary Judson Donnell walking forwards.

Jackson H. Corwin, born in 1896, was from Missouri, who became known as “the Human Crawfish.” On September 17, 1923, he started a transcontinental backwards walk of 5,000 miles from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to San Francisco, California. He put together a booklet that explained his walk. Corwin was member of the Odd Fellows and was an author of humorous articles that had been published in a column in a Stockton, Missouri newspaper.

Corwin said he undertook the trip partly by accident. He overheard two acquaintances discussing the feasibility of a transcontinental hike in Philadelphia one night, where his mother lived. When one man estimated that he could do the distance in six months, Corwin exclaimed, "Why, I could walk it backwards in six months."

He was initially accompanied by Judson Donnell who would be the official timekeeper and watchman to gather proof of his feat. He said he was sponsored by several athletic organizations who would award him a prize if he was successful. He was to walk the entire route backwards and stick to public highways whenever possible, but he had his choice of routes. Times would be recorded for his actual walking time and the overall time. He needed to finish in 500 walking days, averaging ten miles per day. He was allowed to accept generous donations, sell souvenirs, and was to collect signatures from public officials from each town he passed through with a population of 500 or more people. Making it even more difficult and impossible, he was not allowed to mail or forward any luggage or packages between towns. The public was urged to report violations. The "Ocean Gate Athletic Association" of Philadelphia certified the rules.



Corwin said, "My services as lecturer and entertainer will be gladly extended free of charge to any organization having a charitable purpose. I will also be glad to entertain you in your home. The object of this trip is to further the cause of amateur athletics and to gather useful and interesting information for the articles of which I am author." He boasted that he knew more people in America than any other person. In reality, Corwin wasn't well-known, and his hometown newspaper had to remind people who he was.

Walk begins



Near Washington D.C

Witnesses did see Corwin walking. Issac R. Loy reported, "When about 20 miles from the District of Columbia boundary line, I met up with a man walking backward. I accosted him and learned that his name was Jackson H. Corwin. To save his neck from tiring by twisting and to guide himself, he was continually using a hand mirror. And I wondered to myself, what next."

ENTERS CITY BACKWARDS ON CROSS-COUNTRY HIKE

Many newspapers across the country republished a very similar short story and photograph of him, as if they came from a press release. Oddly very few stories were published in local towns or cities that he should have walked through. One newspaper commented, "If the key of some asylum might be turned on him, it might be the best thing that could happen to him."

Bristol, Tennessee reported he came into town on December 3, 1923, having walked 556 miles so far in 78 days. "He is attired in hiking togs consisting of an army uniform. He carries a pack on his back containing traveling necessities which weighs about 40 pounds. In walking backwards, he uses a small hand mirror held

up in front of his shoulder and sees where he is going by looking in the mirror. Tied across the back of his pack is a sign telling the world what he is up to. He attracted the attention of many motorists along the pike between Bristol and Abingdon." He said he averaged about 15 miles per day "facing the way from whence I came." He said his record was 18 miles. It was rumored that the prize money he was seeking was about \$50,000. Along the way Corwin lectured. He walked about 10 hours a day and rested on weekends.

Human Crawfish Stops at Huntingdon

So far Corwin had only fallen down three times. He said he stopped for the nights mostly with farmers along the road and only three would accept money for lodging. Common comments were, "What is that fool doing?" and "When did he get out of the asylum? When he strikes a town after backing into his hotel, he discards the reverse and walks about like any other ordinary human, but when he leaves, he backs out of the same door he came in so as not to lose an inch." His companion had changed to Ralph Bates from Los Angeles, California who came out to join him. "Bates walks directly behind him and warns him of rocks or any other obstacles in the road."



Entering Missionary Ridge Tunnel

Corwin was hit by a truck in Knoxville, Tennessee, but not seriously injured. He talked about the difficulties walking backwards. "It is more of a mental strain than a physical strain. I am especially interested in watching the reactions of the people we pass on the road. About half of them think we are crazy. Of the other half, some think we are doing some advertising stunt, and the rest are convinced that we are detectives. One woman insisted that I take along her missing husband's photo and description so I could detect him too." A common question he would receive was whether he was allowed to stop and sleep at night.

Walk interrupted

After Tennessee, Corwin was next heard from in Muldrow, Oklahoma on April 26, 1924. He had walked 1,546 in 149 walking days out of 222 total days. He was averaging walking about 5 days per week. No flaws can be detected his walking pace. But oddly, Corwin's walk made a significant turn to the north for some reason, and he stopped for a significant time for some reason. He only walked 14 days in the next 137 days. No explanation was given. On September 10, 1924, Corwin arrived at Neosho, Missouri. He now towed a burro as he walked that carried his things including camping gear. He also carried some sort of instrument that measured the miles he walked. He said, "I guide myself by holding a small mirror in such a position as to reflect the road behind me. Being unable to see in this mirror after dark, I am forced to stop in the country more often than not, sometimes camping by the roadside."



Corwin was a blatant self-promoter. "My present tour is probably the most famous tour ever undertaken on this continent. My picture and accounts of my undertaking has appeared in most leading magazines and periodicals and in almost every daily newspaper in America. I have behind me hundreds of thousands of people who will never forget me. Seldom do I arrive in a village or city without a crowd waiting to welcome me. I am entertained in mansions and cabins. Many people are proud to have me as a visitor." He was quite a sight on the road. "I must stand the gaze of the curious, the jeers and jibes of the ill-mannered, the suspicion by many that I am crazy." He said the furthest he had covered in a day was 19.5 miles. His motivation was to gather material for his writings. He again had a new companion who was supposed to be checking on him, Stucker.

Walk ends in Kansas

Still heading north instead of west, on October 22, 1924, Corwin arrived at Fort Scott, Kansas. He explained that he was doing a zigzag course in order to get the needed 5,000 miles. He was selling a booklet about himself and his trip thus far. He changed his walk sponsor to a newspaper, The Bourbon News. This was a sure indicator that the wager/prize money story was bogus. Near the end of November, he was near Kansas City, Missouri, and gave a lecture to the Odd Fellows. He said he had walked 2,052 miles in 201 walking days in a total of 386 days. But Corwin soon quit his walk, and he was no longer reported in the newspapers.



What appears to have happened, is that Corwin was likely doing a legitimate walk until about Neosho, Missouri, after a year's time. He then knew he wouldn't finish and headed north toward his home near Kansas City. He totally quit for several months, but returned to keep up a scam for a few more months earning money and giving lectures. Once arriving at Kansas City, Missouri, near his home, he quit for good. In 1930 Ripley's "Believe it or Not" erroneously included Corwin in its series, stating that he walked all across the country backwards. Perhaps that inspired the next backwards walker.

JACK CORWIN, Decorators DISTRIBUTORS

In the 1940s, Corwin lived in Neodesha, Kansas, was married to Clara, had a daughter Betty, and worked as a painter. In 1955, at age 59, he was working as sign painter in Caney, Kansas and was discovered by a newspaper reporter who knew he was the backwards walker. He still had a scrapbook full of clippings about this backward trek. In 1957 Corwin was interviewed again and stated that his 1923-24 course was in the shape of a "W," that he finished in 1924, at Emporia, Kansas, and that the distance of his backwards walk was about 2,500 miles.



Plennie Lawrence Wingo (1895-1993) was from Abilene, Texas, struggling to earn a living during the early months of the Great Depression. He had lost his café that was in a hotel and was working as a salesman in retail clothing, trying to support his wife and 15-year-old daughter.

In 1930 he conceived of the idea to become an entertainer by learning how to walk backwards at a fast pace. He said the idea came to him when his daughter was talking to a high school boy at a party his daughter put on. The boy mentioned the amazing feats such as Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic, people sitting on flagpoles, and that a man had pushed a peanut up Pike's Peak with his nose. He said there was nothing new left to be done and Wingo said that nobody had ever walked around the world backwards.



The Wingos. Della, Plennie, and Vivian

Perhaps he got the idea from those who came backwards earlier, but it appears that he thought he was inventing the concept of distance walking backwards. He said that for about six months he practiced in secret at night for 15-20 minutes each night so others wouldn't steal his idea to walk the world backwards.

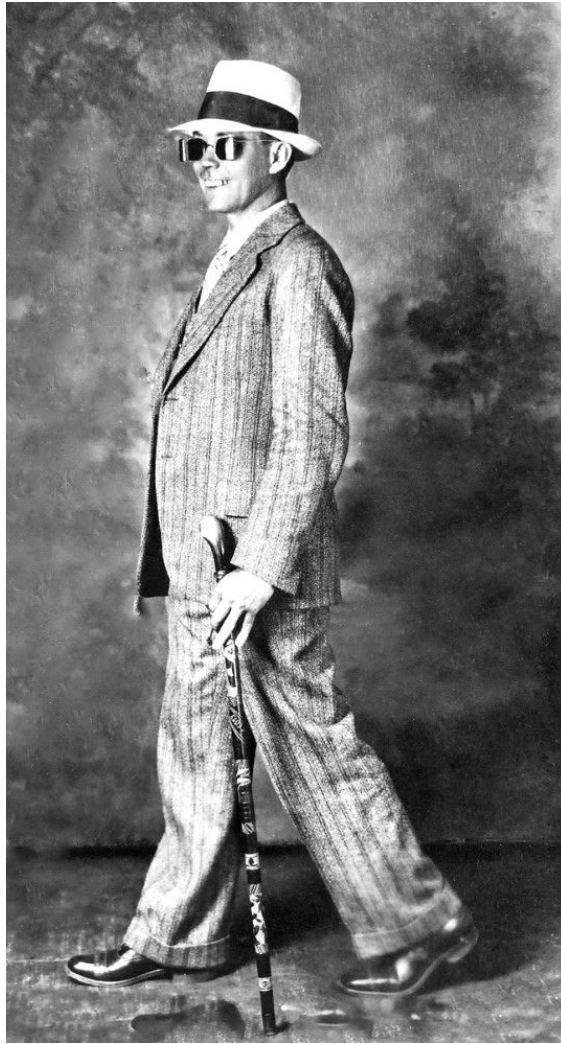
On March, 7, 1931, Wingo made his public backwards walking debut at the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show held at Fort Worth, Texas. He publicized his exhibition ahead of time, wearing a sign that read, "Walking Back to the Rodeo, Fort Worth, March 7 to 15." He claimed to be "the first reverse walker of the world." At the show he wore a cowboy costume and walked backwards wearing advertisements.



After that exhibition, Wingo was convinced to start his backwards walk around the world. "My friends kidded me about it, and that made me all the more determined to carry out my plan." It was reported, "Wingo is beginning a world tour. He says he will walk backwards around the world. He climbs stairs, dodges pedestrians or automobiles and otherwise walks backwards and apparently about as good as the average person does normally. His only aid is eyeglasses which he wears and which have tiny mirrors at the side of each eye." He bought the rear-view mirrors from a mail order house. They were advertised in a magazine as being especially helpful to bicycle riders.

Like others before him, his scheme involved selling postcards along the way. He said it was to raise money for the education of this 16-year-old daughter, Vivian (1915-1978). To his credit, he did not claim he was walking due to some phony wager. He later planned to write a book once his trip was complete. He would keep a detailed diary along the way.

World walk starts



Wingo started from Fort Worth, Texas on April, 15 1931, bound for New York City. Many people wanted to handle his walking cane and take a look at his unique glasses and he quickly realized that all his contact with curious people greatly slowed him down. On his first day he was given \$23.50 in donations along the way. The next day in Dallas he visited a photography studio to take pictures for his postcards. He went by the same rules as Harmon before him and stated that he was allowed to walk forwards around a town after he had his book stamped and then would return to that spot to resume his walk the next day.



By his second week, a story and picture of him had spread to most of the newspapers in America. “The same thing can be said of him that is said of a mythical species of backward-flying birds – He doesn’t care where he’s going, he wants to see where he’s been.”

At Muskogee, Oklahoma some boys tried to get him to accept a ride to the other side of town. Wingo replied, “If I took a ride with you, wouldn’t it be nice if I got a story in the paper that I was cheating? Just me knowing that I cheated would spoil the rest of my trip around the world.” In Joplin, Missouri, a policeman forced him to take his sign off his back because of a city sign ordinance.



On June 3, 1931, Wingo backed his way into St. Louis, Missouri. Many motorists driving the highway toward the city stopped to talk with him. He said, "I hadn't heard of anybody backing around the world, so I just thought I'd try it. It's great for health. I average three miles an hour but stop whenever I feel like it. It seems almost as natural as walking forward. When I get through with the trip I expect the habit will be pretty well formed. I haven't any important engagement until I see my wife and baby again three years from now." Apparently, Della (1896-1978), his wife was not totally on board with Wingo's walk and her letters were increasingly critical because she had the burden at home to survive the Depression.

Backward Hiker Has Run-In With Cop

Wingo was averaging about 15 miles per day total, 20 on walking days. His best day so far was 34 miles in 11 hours. After he crossed over the Mississippi River on the Eads Bridge, into East St. Louis, Illinois, a policeman stopped him, asked him what he was doing and told him he was not allowed to walk backwards in their city because he might get hurt. Wingo was forced to walk forward to the police station and there got permission from the police chief to walk backwards. He then returned to his point of interruption and continued on, looking back at the angry policeman who couldn't stop him.

MAN WALKING BACKWARD AROUND WORLD REACHES CITY

Plennie L. Wingo Left Fort Worth,
Tex., April 15, Due in New
York Next Fall.

At Edwardsville, Illinois Wingo stopped at a barbershop for a haircut and put two new toe plates on his shoes. He had already worn out sixteen pair of the metal plates. He used specially built shoes with heavy soles and low heels and would wear out the toes first. Since Wingo wasn't walking with a partner nor a crew, and was walking between towns close together, he would send his luggage ahead by bus from stop to stop and only carried his cane with a steer horn handle.

Chicago



Walking through Chicago, he was such a curiosity, that crowds gathered around him and started to block traffic. A special policeman was assigned to do crowd control as he walked. "I pretend that I never notice anybody. I walk steadily and rather fast, seeming to concentrate on my own business. When I enter a city I sort of put on an air of mystery and do the people fall for it! First thing you know I've got a job of some sort, usually carrying a sign while I walk backward about the town."

By the end of June, Wingo's stunt was being featured on the Inquirer-Universal Newsreel seen in theaters. "He reports that motorists have been exceptionally kind toward him during his long walk, each one turning to one side as they pass him and waving a greeting as they pass."

On one occasion he caused an automobile accident. "A motorist encountered him on a highway and turned in his seat to stare back at a man walking alone and backward. Another motorist approaching was also interested in Plennie. The two cars hit bang-on, but nobody was hurt."

Injured



Near Canton, Ohio, on July 30, after covering about 1,700 miles, Wingo stepped into a hole on the road, fractured an ankle and was taken to the hospital. From his hospital bed, he vowed to continue his trek once he was healed. He spent three weeks in the hospital free of charge.



After four weeks of healing, Wingo was back on the road on August 24, 1931. He was witnessed refusing rides from motorists. In Pennsylvania while backing out of a city, A policeman pulled him over to issue him a ticket. Wingo asked what the offence was. "Mopery in the second degree." The policeman warned him that he would need a lawyer and issued him a citation. Wingo finally looked at it and it read, "Good luck on your trip around the world." They both had a good laugh. In one Pennsylvania city he was hired to walk backwards in the with a big advertisement placard for four hours. He earned \$25. At Pittsburgh he was given a traffic ticket for walking on the right side of the street, even though he was satisfying the law by facing the cars.

Marriage troubles



After 50 days of not receiving a letter from his wife, she finally wrote again and told him to quit his walk and come home. She was tired of surviving alone. His daughter also wrote telling him that his wife was in poor health. He had not been sending money home. He wrote that "it was the saddest and heart-breakingest letter I have ever read in my life." He felt that both his wife and daughter had turned against him and wanted out. Wingo did not return home, he continued on.

East coast America

In mid October 1931, Wingo arrived in New York City. It was a major milestone for his walk but he still didn't have a major sponsor nor a way to get to England. He considered quitting and decided to move into a boarding house and get a temporary job in a cafeteria. He also worked on getting his passports and finding

passage on a ship to Europe. He earned money doing publicity stunts set up by a manager, including walking backward along an 18-inch ledge of a 12-story building. His manager ended up swindling him out of the money and they got into a fight over it.

In December, he decided to continue walking and went to Connecticut and on to Boston, Massachusetts. At Providence, Rhode Island, he received a letter from his wife Della, informing him that she was through with the marriage. She had asked him to come home and he did not, so she was done with him. He signed the divorce papers. A newspaper included, "If Wingo carries out his intentions of going around the world in reverse, he will have to about face when he gets home to regain his wife's affections. Mrs. Wingo has filed suit for divorce."



Wingo arrived in Boston on December 23, 1931. "He jogged, hoppity-hop at the height of traffic last night, a strange and curious sight for eyes which usually see the world from the accustomed pedestrian's angle." He went to City Hall and announced, "Here I am, Boston." But nearly every one was gone to Christmas parties. He joined in a city clerk's party and received a good meal.

"He wears sawed-off knee-pants and carries a stout cane, giving startled country folks along his way the impression that he is an escaped yodler from the Alps." He had now walked about 2,500 miles and was determined to find a boat to England. He was asked why. "Well, it's an ambition I've had for many years. There's no competition in it, either. Besides, it's a lot of fun. I'm outdoors, too, and I have a great chance to

see the country, even if I do have to look at it backward.”

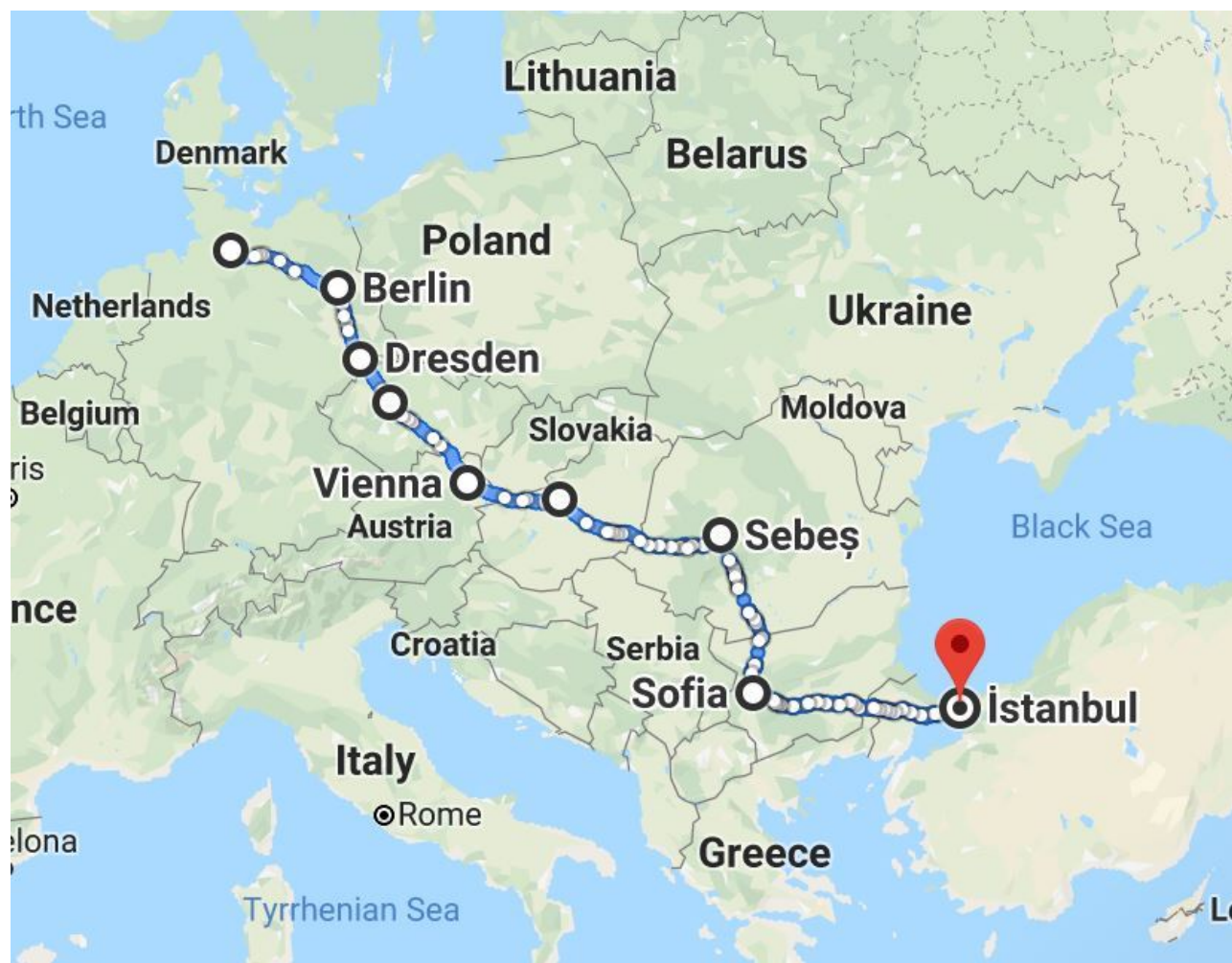
Europe

The head of a shoe company found Wingo passage on a ship to Germany by hiring on with the crew. He steamed to Hamburg, Germany on the Seattle Spirit, on January 12, 1932. He boarded the ship walking down the gangplank backwards. The work and travel was terrible and he suffered from sea-sickness for the first five days. At Hamburg, the steward would not allow him to get off the ship and held back his passport. He had no choice but continue to work on the docked ship. By the end of January, he left the ship while the steward was away.

Most of Wingo's details of his European walk came from a book he later published and it did not sell widely. In more recent years, Ben Montgomery published a fascinating book that used that material in *The Man Who Walked Backward*. Wingo started his backward walk in Hamburg, Germany as curious Germans wondered what the sign in English said on his back. Soon a man helped him with a new sign in German. He left the city on February 1, 1932 heading for Berlin, about 180 miles to the east. Along the way he was treated kindly by the country folk who invited him to stay in their homes after he showed them a news story that had been printed in the Hamburg newspaper. He said that his daily average miles were fewer than in America because he could not rely on getting rooms at inns. He had to develop friendships along the way and that took time. He arrived in Berlin on February 15, 1932. While there, Paramount Pictures took him around town filming a newsreel about him and earned \$20.

Snow hindered Wingo as he continued 100 miles to the south to Dresden and through the German forests beyond, living off the kindness of others. He crossed into Czechoslovakia where the people frowned at his German sign. He made friends with a wealthy man in Prague who gave him a good new suit.

Near Sebes, Romania, after walking about 1,100 miles in Europe thus far, Wingo accidentally dropped his prized cane off a bridge into the water below. He climbed down the bank, stripped, and searched the deep murky water until he found it. “I got a cold from the plunge. It was raining and the rain was almost freezing as it struck.” He arrived at Sebes on April 15, 1932.



In May 1932, he entered Bulgaria and later was arrested at Sofia and taken to jail. The American consulate arranged to free him after five hours. He next headed toward Istanbul, Turkey. At the Turkish border he was locked up for several days but rescued by a kind English-speaking man and he was allowed to go on. But as he arrived in Istanbul, police officers surrounded him and took him to jail and then he was taken to the courtroom many times. After days in jail he met up with the assistant to the American ambassador who promised to help.



The newspapers got word that Wingo was stuck in jail, in Turkey. The story was printed on May 5, 1932. "Plennie Wingo is stranded in Turkey and can't get out backwards or forwards. The Balkan police regulations don't say anything about crabwire passage across the frontiers, so first the Bulgarian police and then the Turkish police arrest him. Now he's in jail without a visa and broke." The story was published by the Associate Press and syndicated widely in newspapers all across America.

The American consul was not interested in helping Wingo, thinking his stunt was ridiculous and stupid. He was being charged for not having enough money to get through Turkey and being a nuisance to the public because of his backward walking. He gave assurance to the Embassy that if they would get him released that he would exit back out of Turkey. He was eventually released and stopped his backward walking. He stayed in Istanbul for awhile trying to figure out if he could continue, but eventually took a steamer to Marseilles, France and then worked his way on the ship Exeter to New York City where he arrived on June 15, 1932.

Analysis of European walk

Did that fantastic adventure really take place in Eastern Europe? There are problems with it. Yes, there is no doubt that he was there. There were some collaboration with other sources. But the primary source of these events was a book that Wingo later published. In the book, for some reason he didn't understand how far he "walked" from Hamburg to Istanbul. He thought it was about 900 miles, but he was actually about 1,000 miles off; it was much further. His timeline and distance did not work well. The A.P. article places him at Istanbul on May 5, 1932 after he had already been in jail from many days. He left Hamburg on February 1st and journeyed about 1,900 miles during that time. He missed many walking days being held in jail and he never walked every day in a week. At most he had about 60 walking days. His pace on walking days in Europe would have had to be about 32 miles per day, an impossibility compared to what he had achieved earlier in America.

Wingo most likely highly embellished his European story decades later for his book and did not walk backwards all that way. He did end up in jail in Turkey, but his story there did not coincide with reports filed by the state department. Like most of the other globetrotters, he started his effort with integrity, but after his family broke apart and with money pressures, he eventually walked backwards into embellishment.

Return to America

**Plennie L. Wingo, Backing Around
World, Lands in San Diego, Cal.,
on His Way Back to Fort Worth**

On Wingo's return to America, in July, he drove with a friend to California. He wanted to finish a transcontinental trip by walking from California to Fort Worth, Texas. He started from Santa Monica on April 13, 1932 and on August 18, 1932, he showed up in Santa Ana, California, checking into the Western Union telegraph office. He falsely bumped up his claimed mileage to about 5,000 miles from 3,500 miles, and said he would reach 7,000 miles by reaching his home in Texas. He reached San Diego on August 23rd.



Police chief with Wingo

In Phoenix, Wingo was arrested by police who said it was against the law to walk backwards within the city and taken to jail. He was told that he would be put in a cell with a murderer. When he asked to make a phone call, he was taken downstairs where he met an old friend laughing. It was all a gag.



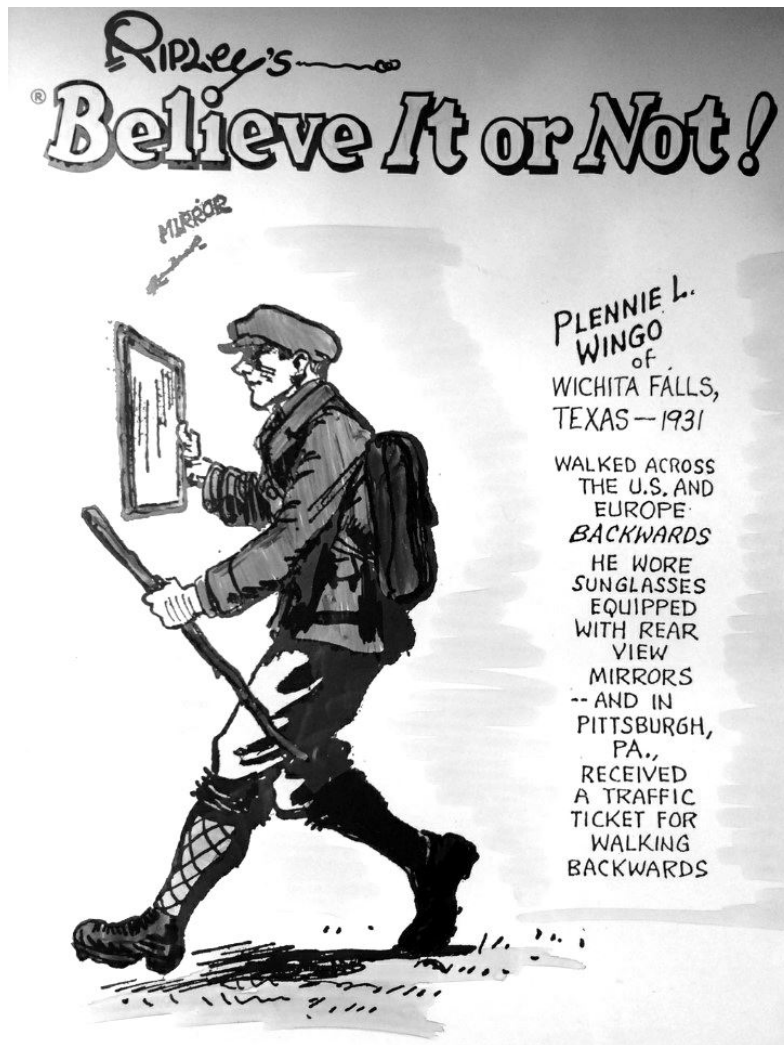
In only one month from San Diego, California, Wingo arrived in El Paso Texas, doing a totally impossible blazing hot 900-mile walk. He claimed that he carried a pillow, blanket, and thermos. He would have needed to carry more than a gallon of fluid. He averaged an impossible 35 miles or more per walking day. Wingo had turned from being an embellisher into a pretender. In his book he later claimed that he had suffered 120-degree heat and had to sleep on the roadside or in stuffy hotel rooms. At El Paso he said he was walking a “blue streak” back home and claimed to be walking 150 miles per week, far less than what he claimed to do across Arizona. He said that Texas looked mighty good, even if you do have to see the hind-end first.

Finishing in Texas



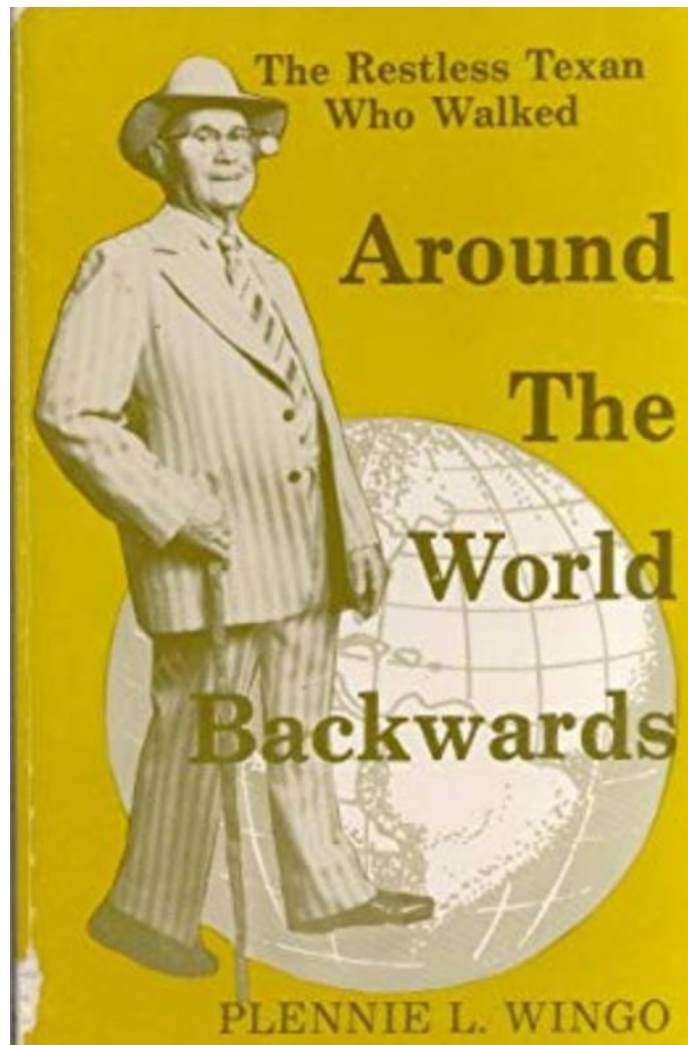
Plennie Wingo.

On October 15, 1932, Wingo returned home to Abilene, Texas with a very fast finishing pace. He was greeted by his daughter, Vivian who still lived with Della, his ex-wife. He said they were on friendly terms. He said about his journey, "A few times I would get a bit discouraged, but never at any time did I lose my determination to stick it out. I walked about 7,000 miles. People ask me what I expect to get out of it. Well, I did something everybody said I couldn't do, or at least I demonstrated that it could be done. That's some satisfaction." He claimed his best "non-stop" backwards walk was 45 miles in 12.5 hours between Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island.



On October 24, 1932, Wingo finished his walk at Fort Worth, Texas. He hoped that the city would award him something, but they didn't. He said, "I won't walk backwards for some time. I've had enough of that to last me."

Wingo soon announced that he would go on a nation lecture tour "in interest of the unemployed." It didn't happen. Wingo wasn't welcomed back to his home in Abilene because of his broken marriage. He moved to Archer City, Texas and worked as a cook in a café. His daughter Vivian later joined him to work there too. Della also later moved there and they later remarried but in 1931 divorced again. In 1946 he married a waitress, Jaunita, who was just three years old when he started his walk. She was 18 when he married her and he was 51. They moved around the country working in the restaurant business.



Wingo published his book, "Around the World Backwards" in 1966. Few outside his family bought the book. He later changed his total backward mileage to 8,000 miles. It probably was closer to 5,000 miles. In 1971 his name was put into the Guinness records book for being "the only man to walk across the U.S. backward." That put him back in the news. His old home town of Abilene published an article with the headline, "Who is Plennie Wingo?" He later became featured by Ripley's Believe It or Not.

Bicentennial backwards Walk

For America's bicentennial at the age of 81, Wingo, living in Los Angeles, announced that he would walk across the country backwards in five months. He started training by walking backwards each day, five miles to Culver City, California and back. "When I want a good workout, I go all the way to downtown Los Angeles."

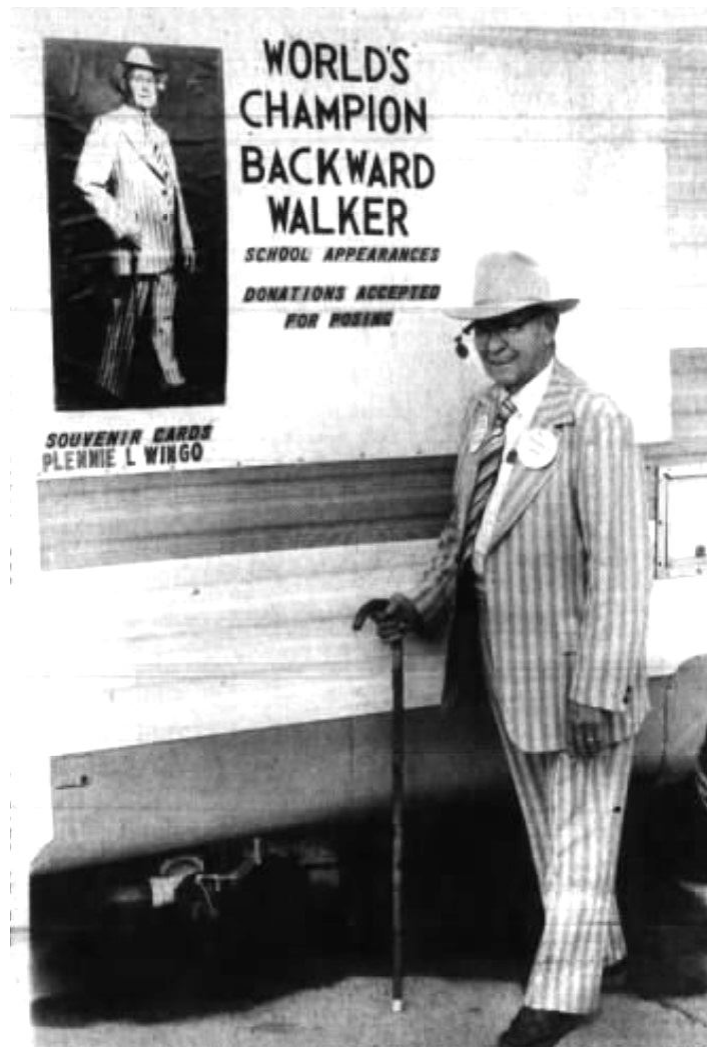




In 1976, he appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. During the interview, he asked for help finding a sponsor. He very soon cut back his plans and in late July 1976, started a walk from Fisherman's Warf in San Francisco to Santa Monica along the Pacific Coast Highway for about 450 miles. He started off on July 31, 1976 with new glasses made with dental mirrors and wore hearing aids. Ripley Museums sponsored him.



Out on the road, Wingo said, "I've' go my fast-walking shoes on and I'm feeling just great. I'm having a good time meeting good people and getting plenty of invitations to stay in people's homes. Everyone wants to help me." He arose each day at 5 a.m., did 20 minutes of stretching, and usually walked for about eight hours. He traveled alone except on weekends when his wife drives into town with a fresh change of clothes and sets up headquarters in a nearby motel. In addition to being stopped by people in automobiles during his walks, most of whom already know who he is, the highway patrol frequently drops by to deliver messages from radio and TV stations and newspapers. Most ask him to call them collect from the next roadside phone booth. "When Wingo quits for the day, he usually marks the place where he stopped by taping one of his cards to a road sign or telephone pole."



Wingo took a nasty fall at one point and sprained an ankle so that he had to finish the walk using his cane significantly. He did finish but decided there just was not enough money in the profession and he said he would retire. In 1978, he and his wife went on a nation-wide tour in a motor home for Ripley's. They visited towns and schools delivering anti-dug talks.



In 1989 at the age of 94, Wingo was interviewed in Texas. "Wearing a weathered, gray felt hat, the perky, blud-eyed fellow carefully donned the dulled, tortoise-shell glasses and began fiddling with the mirrors extending from the arms of the ancient spectacles. "These mirrors here are adjustable." Thinking back over his accomplishments, he said, "I'm in all these museums in wax and I'm in the Guinness Book of World Records.



Plennie Wingo died in 1993 at the age of 98.

Yes, walking backwards was an ultrarunning thing. Will it ever return? Running backwards is also a thing and called retro running. The fastest known backwards marathon is 3:43 set by ZU Zhenjun at Beijing in 2004. The fastest known 100 km is 12:20, and the best 24 hours is 95.4 miles. Who will get the fastest known backward 100-miler?

Read all parts:

Part 1 – Around the World on Foot (1875-1895)

Part 2 – Around the World on Foot Craze (1894-96)

Part 3 – Around the World on Foot (1894-1899)

Part 4 – Around the World on Foot – The Bizarre

Part 5 – Races Around the World on Foot – Dumitru Dan

Part 6 – Walking Backwards Around the World

Part 7 – Dave Kunst – Walk Around the World – 1

Part 8 – Dave Kunst – Walk Around the World – 2

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World Records for Backwards Running