

“We were tramps along with the rest of them”

The Journal of Earl Neller, Who Hitchhiked across
South Dakota with Six Children in 1933

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At the height of the Great Depression in the summer of 1933, Earl Neller and six children tramped, hitchhiked, and railroaded some 850 miles across the Dakotas over twenty-seven days. Neller, a high school teacher from St. Louis, Missouri, and the children, ages eight to thirteen, hiked west from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, journeyed through the Black Hills, then headed north until they reached their destination in Hebron, North Dakota.

Along the way, they encountered a menagerie of characters: an old man with a loud whistle, a little lady with a sweet voice, a big fat man and his red truck, a newspaper reporter, a man who looked like a wrestler, migrant workers in a railcar, Civilian Conservation Corps workers, a black-haired mountaineer and his wolflike dog, both real life and “jolly” cowboys, war veterans, one of “Uncle Sam’s” forest rangers, a man with a big sombrero, a skilled fisherman, an old man with a limp who promoted a cave tour, a night watchman with a deep-toned voice, and two women who provided a captivating history of the western Dakotas. The travelers visited various towns, natural wonders, and tourist stops, including the Corn Palace, Mount Rushmore, Iron Mountain Road, Battle Mountain Sanitarium, Harney Peak, Wind Cave, Crystal Cave, Mount Moriah Cemetery, and the Homestake Mine. They slept under the stars and in the rain, in boxcars and tourist camps, in wheat fields and near farmhouses, and by creeks and derelict homes. They hiked on dusty dirt roads, up the imposing elevations of the Black Hills, during bitter cold mornings, hot summer days, and relentless winds. Finding and carrying enough water and food was a dominant concern, yet they never ran out. Despite never knowing how or when they would make it to their next destination and fearful that any of them would get sick, they always rose for the next day’s adventure.

Travel and tourism endured in the United States during the Great Depression. While the number of tourists declined in the early 1930s, there remained an impulse for leisure and vacationing. As historian Cindy Aron notes, “Although many people put their vacations on hold, considerable numbers continued to vacation—even during the most severe economic times.”¹ Across the nation, historical, natural, and leisure destinations welcomed visitors, as did diverse local businesses that encouraged regional tourism. Neller’s travel journal detailed the South Dakota towns, tourist camps, historical sites, museums, caves, and other natural wonders the group visited, as well as the gas stations, grocery stores, post offices, hotels, chambers of commerce, farmhouses, promoters, and travel literature that assisted them. The travel journal documents the perpetual human desire to experience the new and unfamiliar, even amid a persistent drought and economic depression.

Earl Henry Neller was born 29 August 1893 on a farm near DeWitt, Michigan, the second of Theodore and Mary Neller’s five children. He attended country school through the eighth grade and graduated in 1912 from Lansing High School in Lansing, Michigan. Neller then attended Albion College, receiving a bachelor’s degree in commercial sciences in 1917. In June of the same year, he enlisted in the Michigan National Guard. He went to France in January 1918 with the 32nd Division and saw action at Château-Thierry, Montfaucon, and the Argonne. He was wounded in the leg on 10 October 1918 and discharged stateside the following January. He enrolled at the University of Michigan that year, earning a second bachelor’s degree and a teaching certificate in June 1920 and a master’s degree in English and French a year later. Sometime in 1920, Neller met and married Lydia Munz, an unwed mother, whose daughter Carolyn was born on 1 October of that year. Neller moved

1. Cindy Aron, *Working at Play, A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 239. See also *ibid.*, pp. 237–57. See also Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road, From Autocamp to Motel, 1910–1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979), pp. 142–55; For tourism during this period in South Dakota, see Suzanne Barta Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles, Black Hills Tourism, 1880–1941* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2009), pp. 102–69; Suzanne Barta Julin, “Building a Vacationland: Tourism Development in the Black Hills during the Great Depression,” *South Dakota History* 35 (Winter 2005): 291–314; Shebby Lee, “Traveling the Sunshine State: The Growth of Tourism in South Dakota, 1914–1939,” *South Dakota History* 19 (Summer 1989): 194–223.



Earl Neller, standing at center, poses for a photograph with the six children who accompanied him from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to Hebron, North Dakota: Carolyn Neller (back left), Dora Kincaid (back right), Elaine Neller (middle left), Mildred Kincaid (middle right), Albert Kincaid (bottom left), and Virgil Neller (bottom right).

to Bordeaux, France, with Lydia and Carolyn to teach high school in April 1922. Their daughter Elaine was born eleven months later. The family returned to St. Louis soon thereafter, and Neller began teaching French, English, and commercial subjects at Cleveland High School. Their youngest son Virgil was born in 1925. Charles Kincaid, whose children Dora, Mildred, and Albert accompanied the Nellers through South Dakota, taught math at Cleveland High School; the Neller and Kincaid families were well acquainted by the summer of 1933.²

Earl Neller and each child kept personal diaries of their journey through South Dakota. Neller's travel journal is the only narrative of the trip known to exist, but he sparingly includes pieces of the children's accounts, which offer additional details, throughout his journal. A travel journal such as Neller's, as scholar Marguerite Shaffer notes, offers "a record of the actual, the educational, and the imaginative journey . . . Travel diaries both codified the tour as a single experience and served to memorialize one's journey."³

Archivists often receive emails, letters, phone calls, or have face-to-face conversations with "someone who knows someone" who has "something of historical importance." In June 2020, the South Dakota State Archives received one of those emails. The sender knew a friend with a travel journal from 1933 that documented a trip that her grandfather and six children, one of whom was her mother, took through South Dakota. That conversation led to the donation of the Earl H. Neller Journal, including both the original typed, eighty-six-page manuscript and scans of the journal pages. During the accessioning process, when archivists organize and catalog materials to make them available to researchers, the staff created a transcript of Neller's travel journal. By a considerable stroke of luck, archivists also discovered nine black and white photographs of the Neller and Kincaid children tucked inside an old envelope and squirreled away within the old brown paper bag wrapping that housed Neller's journal.

2. Earl's youngest son, also named Earl Neller, compiled biographical information on his father that supplemented the travel journal donation. See "Earl H. Neller Journal—South Dakota Hitchhiking Trip, June/July 1933" (H2020-002), South Dakota State Archives, Pierre, S.Dak.

3. Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), pp. 265–66.

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A little later a man came over and pointed out some interesting places to see. By all means we should not miss the Rushmore Memorial with the mighty face of Washington carved out on the mountain in granite, one of the most gigantic attempts of its kind in all ages. Two high school girls came over to chat with Carolyn and Dora. Finally, a dog got some porcupine quills in his nose. Virgil yelled over: "May we stay over here a little longer to help hold a dog? It has some porcupine quills in its nose."

"Yes, if you want to," I shouted back.

It was not long before they ~~came back~~ returned with some of the spines for souvenirs.

Elaine's Account of the Same Day
Sunday, June 25

"We got up at about 5:00 o'clock. Mildred and I started to walk first. We stopped about two times, but did not wait for the others. The next time we stopped and waited for the others. After we were rested, we started to walk ~~again~~ again. We stopped once to get rested, but went on right away. The next time we stopped, we ate our breakfast and wrote in our diaries. In the afternoon, a man told us a short cut through the woods. When we ended, we came out where there was a dump for old cars. We then got some water at a spring. After we had our canteens filled, we walked a little while. We found a shady tree and staid there. The boys went with daddy to the store to buy things to eat. While they were down there a man and woman came over and talked with us. After daddy came home, the man told daddy that we could sleep in his pasture. After we were done eating, I went to a girl's house. They built a camp fire and I staid to watch it for a while. After a while, I went to bed."

Mt. Rushmore
Monday, June 28

We decided to sleep this moring and did not get up until the sun was high. Finally, it became so warm that the children c could stand the heat under the blankets no longer. We rolled our packs, moved underthe shade, washed at the creek, and prepared breakfast. Virgil and Albert went to the store for two quarts of milk. When they returned, they had an accident. Virgil dropped his bottle and broke a large hole

Neller and the children each kept handwritten journals during their trip. After they returned, Neller typed up his journal and included occasional excerpts from those that the children had compiled, as this page demonstrates.

Primary sources—materials recorded and saved in various formats that document unique firsthand accounts of historical events, such as diaries, journals, letters, photographs, scrapbooks, and photo albums—are the indispensable building blocks of historical research and writing. The preservation of primary sources provides researchers the ability to access, study, evaluate, and reevaluate historical records. The archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society—as well as other university archives, museums, libraries and historical societies in South Dakota—exist to collect and preserve these individual accounts of history, making them available to both present and future generations.⁴

On 23 June 1933, Neller wrote, “We were tramps along with the rest of them.” Indeed, that night he and the children had hopped a railroad boxcar at Vivian and hitched a ride through the White River Badlands to Rapid City. During that train ride and throughout their entire 850-mile, twenty-seven-day journey, the Neller-Kincaid group recorded their experiences, leaving behind a valuable, firsthand account of the land and people of the Dakotas in the early 1930s. Earl Neller’s travel journal is the story of a man and six children who explored South Dakota during a severe economic depression and a devastating drought, yet repeatedly found welcoming hands and probing curiosity from those they encountered along the way.

Wednesday, 21 June

Earl Neller’s first entry in the travel journal noted that he, his wife Lydia, and the six children—Carolyn, Elaine, and Virgil Neller, along with Dora, Mildred, and Albert Kincaid—left their home in St. Louis on Monday, 19 June.⁵ They drove from Kansas City that Tuesday. The first day of their adventure through South Dakota began at seven in the morning on Wednesday as the blue family car arrived in Sioux Falls.

4. Archivists have distinct responsibilities to manuscript creators, donors, users, and to the archival material itself. For more information on the work of archivists, see Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005); James O’Toole and Richard Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006); Laura Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practice* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2010).

5. For the sake of clarity and consistency, all members of the group will be referred to by their first names in the narrative portion of this article.

Earl remarked that the children “began jumping and running about like young colts” after they exited the car.⁶

The kids started their hike while Earl and Lydia stopped at the post office and grocery store. The plan called for Lydia to drive to her parents’ home in Hebron, North Dakota, where they would rendezvous later that summer. Earl and Lydia caught up with the children, and with their packs ready to go, the group “bid mamma good-bye” and walked west toward the Black Hills.⁷

An entry in Earl’s typed manuscript revealed his overall perspective on the journey: “Little did we dream of the struggles and labor and self-denial that we would have to go through before reaching our destination about 850 miles away! To hike and hitch-hike with six children in rain and sunshine, to have blistered feet, to sleep out under the stars, to wash our clothes, to cook our food, to get hungry and thirsty and sick, these were some of the experiences that we had not fully reckoned with.”⁸

The hikers’ inexperience, the heavy packs, and the heat of the day quickly produced sweaty faces and sore shoulders. Soon the first of many rides arrived in the form of a Ford truck. Earl described the driver’s view of this unique troop: “He stopped and gazed at us in our new khaki shirts and breeches, straw hats, and high-topped boots. Virgil wore a cowboy’s hat and I had on an army service hat. The two boys both had rifle belts with a bayonet hung at the side. They were playing

6. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this article are taken from the original Neller journal, available at the South Dakota State Archives. Specific page number references have been omitted to eliminate repetition in the notes.

7. While Lydia went by car to Hebron, Earl and the children tramped. “Tramping,” according to historian Cindy Aron, “was perhaps the most strenuous of camping, requiring campers to carry provisions on their backs . . . by the 1910s, tramping was becoming popular for women and men alike.” Aron, *Working at Play*, p. 230.

8. In her book, *See America First*, Marguerite Shaffer references a number of travel journals, narratives, and accounts similar to Earl’s. As she states, “These narratives reveal that tourists stopped to admire natural scenery, historic sites, and technological wonders, just as the prescriptive literature instructed them to and in doing so they sought to come in contact with people and places that embodied the real America . . . in seeing the sights of American history and the landscapes of the nation, tourists experienced firsthand the character and nuances of the nation, and their narratives overflow with references to the various American types and the distinct American places they surveyed.” Shaffer, *See America First*, p. 228.



The children rest and wait for a ride on a desolate stretch of gravel road at an unknown location in the Dakotas in this photograph

soldier now. Carolyn and Dora had a trench knife hung to theirs.” This first “lift” brought them to Hartford. It was the only one in which the driver suggested they leave a tip. Another ride took them as far as Humboldt. The difficulty of the first day’s travel showed: “It was not long before our muscles were too sore to go any further. Besides, we were in no hurry. There were as many as eight weeks in which to make our journey if necessary.”

Near Humboldt, they picked out a knoll by the road and prepared for their first night outdoors. Earl wondered if the group “could sleep outside for a week without getting sick.” They began adjusting to unfamiliar hardships: “We were not used to such hard beds, nor ants, nor mosquitoes, nor cold nights. Life in the city does not lend itself to such inconveniences.” Earl took time to note the sleeping arrangements and the children’s ages. “Dora, who was thirteen years old, made her bed with Carolyn [twelve]. Mildred, age eleven and Elaine, age ten, made their bed together. I slept with Albert [nine] and Virgil [eight].”

Thursday, 22 June

The journal frequently references the exceptionally hot days and frigid nights the group endured. A chilly, windy South Dakota morning greeted Earl and the kids on 22 June. After the cold woke Earl around midnight, he put on additional clothing and checked on the children, grouping them together and covering them with haversacks and blankets. "By four o'clock the breeze had become so chilly that I could stand it no longer," he wrote, "my teeth chattered as I laced up my shoes. Then I took the stove in one hand and the food case in the other and hurried down the road for half a mile in order to get warmed up."

Earl woke the children before the sun met the horizon, and they walked down the road in pairs. After hiking a short distance, a familiar and often repeated request came from the kids: "I'm hungry." "Four weeks later," Earl reflected, "we would have laughed at ourselves, if we had become sore and tired after so little walking. Each one shook off his pack and sat down on the culvert. I cut a loaf of bread in seven pieces, passed them around, and poured beans upon them." The group walked for two more hours and stopped at a farmhouse. Earl used the small gasoline stove, which he carried the whole trip, for the first time to make oatmeal. They went back to the farmhouse to wash up, then continued as the chilly morning gave way to a sweltering day. "The brave little youngsters were very cheerful," except Elaine, who shed the first tears from hiking and the weighty pack on her shoulders.⁹

At ten that morning, they hitched a ride in a poultry truck to Montrose. The group found a shady spot next to a lumberyard while Earl left to buy groceries. By the time he returned, "Three men and a small group of children were quizzing the youngsters. 'What are you doing?' 'Where are you going?' 'Are you all brothers and sisters?' etc. One jolly old man with a loud whistle was joshing the children . . . Soon he gave a loud shrill whistle and said: 'Come over here, Ed. I've got something to

9. Pain, hardship, and discomfort were commonplace during the group's journey, including sore shoulders, blisters, hunger, exhaustion, oppressive heat, and unexpected rain showers. "For tourists used to the comforts of middle-class homes, camping, even under the best conditions, could bring discomfort," writes John A. Jakle. "Hardship was a relative thing . . . limited hardship gave meaning to travel. Discomfort overcame was the essence of adventure." Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 155.

show you.” The man explained to Ed, a Montrose lumber dealer, that the group was hiking to the Black Hills. Ed left and soon returned with seven ice cream cones, to the joy of the youngsters. The jolly old man used his loud whistle to stop a sedan:

Where was he going? . . . Through Salem, through Spencer, through Farmer through Fulton. Yes, even to Mitchell. About fifty miles. All of us packed our luggage somewhere and crowded into his two seated sedan. When we arrived at Mitchell, he went out of his way to show us the Corn Palace, the only structure of its kind in the world. The outside was beautifully decorated with pictures of lakes, buildings, and natural scenery made from different colors of corn. You can just imagine how grateful we were for the big “lift” that this man had given us.¹⁰

In Mitchell, Earl realized that the group stood out: “How the people stared at us with our belts and trench knives and bayonets and gun and bread and cans of fruit and haversacks and blanket rolls! They had seen almost every combination of travelers in the world, but no gang like this one.” They walked on. Shortly after leaving, Earl felt a tap on his shoulder from “a little lady with a sweet voice . . . quite out of breath,” who carried a pail they had left behind. Earl remarked, “I might say here that this was only the beginning of our losing things. . . . And I really was glad, because we would have been lost without anything to cook our food in.” The little lady then asked about their trip. After Earl explained, she declared, “Oh, how thrilling! I’d like that too . . . I certainly wish you good luck.”

Having left the curious little lady with a sweet voice behind them, the group walked two more blocks and encountered a “big fat man” who had pulled his truck to the curb to water his radiator. Dora went up and asked the man for a ride, and he agreed to take the group to Plankinton. The Nellers and Kincaids piled into his big red stock truck for their third ride of the day, through Mount Vernon to a point a few miles past Plankinton. Earl continued:

10. A grain shortage during the early 1930s reduced the overall number of murals on the Corn Palace. The murals were reused in 1932. The following year, local organizations and service clubs financed the decorations. Robert Schutt, *The Corn Palace Story* (Mitchell, S. Dak.: Robert Schutt, 1976), p. 12; Mitchell Chamber of Commerce, *A Year by Year History of the World’s Only Corn Palace* (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Educator Supply Company, 1959), pp. 24–26.



This postcard shows a scene from downtown Mitchell, with the Corn Palace in the distant background, around the time the Neller-Kincaid group visited the town.

We had just assembled ourselves on the bank of the road close to a hail damaged grove and had barely drunk a quart of milk, when the children sighted another truck. The fellow must have thought it was a ‘hold up,’ because he stopped immediately. He let us ride and took us within three miles of White Lake. . . . Everyone was in good spirits, because of the rapid progress we had made. No shade trees were in sight that we could take advantage of. The hot sun was still high enough to make it very warm. . . . Our foreheads and lips suffered from the wind and heat. The children gathered themselves in a circle and began playing cards.

Around five-thirty, they washed up at a farmhouse; the dusty gravel roads resulted in dirty hands and faces.¹¹ After they ate, a small herd

11. At the time of the Neller-Kincaid trip, most highway surfaces in South Dakota were gravel. The Annual Report of the South Dakota State Highway Commission ending in June 1933 tallied 5,969 miles of roads in the state, of which 4,264 miles (71 percent) were gravel. *Annual Report of the South Dakota State Highway Commission*, June 1933, p. 16.

of cattle came to investigate. The kids tried to touch them but could not get close enough. A large stock truck approached, and the children shouted, “Hey, Mister! Give us a ride!” The driver and the truck’s owner were going to Presho. Earl described the ride across this section of the state, detailing the drought conditions, crops, and grasshoppers:

Through White Lake, Kimball, Pukwana, Chamberlain, Oacoma, Reliance, Kennebec, to Presho we flew. Yes, really flew! For thirty-five or forty miles an hour was fast compared to one mile an hour on foot. The crops along the way were burned up badly by the sun and wind. Grasshoppers jumped everywhere in some places. The radiators of the cars that we met were covered with them, and the windshields were spotted from hitting them. The wheat did not seem to be more than six or eight inches high, yet it was ripening. The heat and drought of the past few weeks would let nothing grow. Cattle had been turned in on some of the crops. Many trees were dead at the tops and outer branches owing to previous hailstorms. It reminded one of an old war shelled forest in France.¹²

The truck stopped at Chamberlain while its owner attended to some business. The truck driver, who remained, asked questions that the children were by now accustomed to: “Why are you people going to the Black Hills?”; “How long have you been on the road?”; “Where do you sleep?”; “Aren’t you afraid of snakes, or dogs and things like that?” The children asked the driver questions of their own; the conversation lasted about an hour until the truck owner returned.

Ominous storm clouds hid the bright stars. It became pitch dark near Reliance, and the wind blew harder at Kennebec. Lightning appeared in the distance as the air became cooler. Anticipating rain, Earl woke the children: “Elaine, Albert, Virgil, and Mildred were fast asleep, little dreaming of the oncoming storm. I even had dosed [sic] earlier in the evening. But the children had to be aroused now.” By the glow of a flashlight, he assembled their packs in the back of the moving truck and cov-

12. Histories on the Great Depression in South Dakota include R. Alton Lee, *A New Deal for South Dakota: Drought, Depression, and Relief, 1920–1941* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2016); Catherine Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Lorena Hickok, *One-Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

ered the kids with a large canvas just as big raindrops began to fall. The truck pulled into a tourist camp at Presho and found cover just as the heavy rain started. Earl recorded, “I thanked [the driver] most heartily and insisted that he take some pay for the ride; but he would have none of it.” The group squeezed into the tiny eight-by-ten-foot cabin for the night. “Anything,” Earl explained, “was good enough that would protect us from that awful rain. Five of us lay crosswise on the bed. Virgil and I lay on the floor. The rain began to come down in torrents. What did we care? We were safe now.”¹³ Indeed, “The children were soon fast asleep in spite of the terrific wind and the heavy rain. The poor little

13. The travel journal mentions tourist camps at Presho, near Mount Rushmore, Rapid City (twice), Hill City, and Lead. For tourist camps in South Dakota, see Chris Nelson, “Life along the Road: The Tourist Camp in South Dakota,” *South Dakota History* 35 (Winter 2005): 315–34. The South Dakota State Planning Board’s 1936 report noted the growing popularity of vacation travel, the commercial advantages for South Dakota communities, and an increasing need for tourist and recreational parks. The report listed one hundred South Dakota communities with either small tourist parks or municipal park areas that had been or were being improved. South Dakota State Planning Board, “Recreation in South Dakota, A Preliminary Report” (Brookings, S.Dak.: Central Office, 1936), pp. 102–4; “Western Guide and Directory, Travel and Vacation Information for Motor Tourists” (Indianapolis: National Publishing Co., 1931), pp. 121–23; Purl D. Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and the Badlands of South Dakota* (Pierre: J. Fred Olander Company, 1929). Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 138–40; For national references see Jakle, *The Tourist*, pp. 158–61; Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, pp. 71–142.



Grasshoppers and drought damaged fields such as this one near Pierre, photographed in August 1933, not long after the Neller-Kincaid group traveled across the state.

things! How could they help it after that long hard day from 4:30 in the morning. We had caught five rides and traveled about one hundred and seventy miles.”

Friday, 23 June

Everyone was up by eight o'clock the next morning. The day began with the washing of dirty hands and faces. “How many places there are that little children naturally miss! It would be quite an experience to just let them wash as they pleased for a whole month, and then take a picture of them. There they were, letting the water run in between their fingers, rolling merely the palms of their hands over their mouths, and leaving a long streak of dirt passing down under the chin and going from one ear to the other.”

They left the tourist camp at noon, walked through Presho to the main highway, and stopped at a filling station. Earl casually remarked in his journal that “a newspaper man came up and asked about me.” A week



When the Nellers and Kincaids passed through Presho, seen in this image from the period, they caught the attention of a *Lyman County Herald* reporter who wrote a story on the group and referred to them as “a family of hitch-hikers.”

later, the *Lyman County Herald* ran a brief story on the Neller-Kincaid party: "There was a family of hitch-hikers in the city last Friday about noon, stationed at the Sather filling station enjoying their noon day lunch and keeping their eyes peeled for an opportunity for a ride west. In the company were Mr. E. H. Nellar [sic] and three children; also three children of the Kinkaid [sic] family . . . They were a very happy bunch of children, very talkative and enjoying themselves after their noon day lunch with a game of cards."¹⁴

Earl and the children left Prescho and the reporter behind them, caught a quick two-mile ride, walked another mile, and hitched another four-mile ride on a gas truck. Dora lost her hat to the wind. The heat was scorching along the treeless highway: "My! How that sun did beat down upon us! My left hand and both of Dora's hands were swollen and puffed up, either because of the sunburn or because of what we carried." On reaching a hilltop overlooking Vivian, they sat down for a break and a meal, only to discover that their bread had gone moldy, and they had only canned fruit and some emergency hardtack to eat. It was now half past four, and the group wondered if they could reach the town before the stores closed. Pressing on, they walked for fifteen minutes before catching a quick ride to Vivian by standing on the vehicle's running boards. They were let off at a local garage and drank from a well. Earl was "a little suspicious of the water, because it was merely drawn up by a rope from a small dug well." But locals affirmed that it was drinkable "and the thirsty children enjoyed the water immensely."

A man on a horse rode by, which excited the two boys. "Oh, give me a ride," yelled Virgil. The man agreed; Virgil mounted the horse and they galloped down the road. After they returned, Earl wrote, "the man dismounted and put Albert on alone. The horse started to canter slowly away. 'Oh, don't let him go alone,' I shouted. 'He isn't used to horses. He will fall off.'" The man duly remounted the horse and rode together with Albert. Earl recorded the happy boys saying, "Now we will have something to write about."

Earl went to the store in Vivian and purchased oranges and bread for supper. They looked for a place to sleep for the evening and observed that "the sky was threatening again." Having camped by the railroad

14. *Lyman County Herald* (Prescho, S.Dak.), 29 June 1933.



At Vivian, captured in this undated photograph, the troop jumped into a cattle car occupied by migrant workers, who advised them to skip the Badlands and take the train directly to Rapid City.

tracks, they devised a plan to rush into a nearby boxcar if it rained. They also secured a ride for the next day from a man at the filling station who agreed to take the group to Murdo, as long as they could leave by half past six the next morning. As Earl explained, “Of course we would be ready. This walking in the hot sun wasn’t according to our taste.” As the weather became more threatening, the party debated their plan to spend the night in a boxcar. Then, as Earl described:

Suddenly, there was a very loud whistle; and a freight train with many empty cattle cars pulled into the station. Would they kick us off if we got on? We could try. On went our packs, our stove,—everything we had. Other hikers assisted us too. One old bum offered to help, and I told him that I could manage my own affairs. There were eight men in this same cattle car with us. They were surprised to see one man with so many children. It did not take long to get acquainted with some of them.

The travel journal described the cattle car companions: “There were about forty men on the train. Those in our car were quite young and

ranged in ages from about eighteen to twenty-two. Their character did not seem to be hardened as we so often think of men living in this manner. They were men who were out of a job through no fault of their own.”¹⁵ The first question came from “a wrestler by the looks of his muscles,” who asked where they were going. “Murdo,” they replied. “There is some pretty bad water in that part of the country, and you must watch it,” another man in the cattle car stated. “It can’t be much worse than some we had in France,” Earl responded. He explained that during World War I the soldiers filled their canteens with stagnant, bug-filled water. Further, Earl noted, they traveled on boxcars with just four wheels, and when a wheel had a flat side, the whole boxcar shook. He regaled them with war stories of Château-Thierry, Montfaucon, and the Argonne. He told them about trench life and the dugouts, how everyone was wet and hungry, and finally of being wounded in battle. Earl won their admiration.

When the conversation returned to the present, the wrestler informed Earl that the train only traveled as far as Rapid City. Earl then told the men in the cattle car that he and the children wanted to see the Badlands. A different man replied, “Bad Lands is right . . . You won’t be able to get a lick of water between the towns, and in them you will have to buy it.” Meanwhile, the children, thrilled to be traveling by rail, peered through the cattle car boards and surveyed the immense herds of cattle.¹⁶ The youngsters urged Earl to continue to Rapid City, foregoing the Badlands.

Near nightfall, a brakeman alerted Earl and the children that a boxcar in the rear was bound for Rapid City. It soon began to rain. “So right then and there we decided definitely to go to Rapid City. The very name ‘Bad Lands’ sounds B-A-D to us. . . . The floor was covered with cement;

15. As historian James R. McGovern explains, an “astonishing number of Americans, perhaps two million,” lived an itinerant existence in the early years of the Great Depression, “mostly young men and mostly in search of jobs. And so they climbed into the boxcars, hopped off where they pleased and looked for work, hitchhiked, and shared temporary campsites set up by fellow transients.” McGovern, *And a Time for Hope: Americans in the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishing, 2000), p. 10.

16. The group’s interest in the herds of cattle they encountered was not unique: “As tourists approached the High Plains from the east, nothing gave them the sense of being in the West as much as signs of ranching. The open range, with the cattle and the cowboys who tended them, spoke of freedom and individuality.” Jakle, *The Tourist*, p. 231.

but what did it matter! We were tramps along with the rest of them. . . . All in all, it seemed that this might prove to be a priceless experience to the youngsters. There were about thirty men in the car besides us. But we had won friends in the cattle car, who would have helped us in case of need.” The children immediately fell asleep.¹⁷

Saturday, 24 June

Earl’s description of the train ride across the Badlands is among the most vivid in his journal:

I slept very poorly during the night, and often slipped my hand over my pocket to see if my money was still there. Then I arose as soon as the first gleams of dawn appeared. Virgil and Albert were soon up, too; and it was not long before we were all at the door gazing at the insurmountable, stratified, barren and weird formations of the ground. It is no wonder that the Indians named them Mako (land) and Sica (bad). It is difficult country to travel through, not only on account of its roughness and precipitous walls, but also because of the bad water. Many men, both red and white, must have perished miserably because they were unable to find good water. That is why we did not care to walk through. Good water was the most necessary thing on our trip. Most of the area, within the Bad Lands proper is fairly level and fertile, and one sees some comfortable farmsteads and up-to-date ranches. I was told later that the settlers have found shallow wells of pure soft water, as much of the upper strata is composed of a gravel formation. The ground on the surface, however, is gumbo soil; and the fantastic tales of mud rolling up on the tires and packing so hard in between the wheels and fenders that the car cannot move seems unbelievable, until one has heard it about a dozen times.

The train arrived at the Rapid City railyard at seven in the morning, and a man pointed them in the direction of the chamber of commerce.

17. Earl, the children, and their new friends rode on the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific rail line, which ran west from Vivian to Kadoka, where the line veered south of the Badlands through Weta, Interior, Imlay, Scenic, Creston, Farmingdale, and Caputa before entering Rapid City. *Highway Map of the State of South Dakota*, South Dakota State Highway Commission, 1933, Map Collections (2019-09-24-0009), South Dakota Digital Archives.



Countless onlookers have been captivated by the “roughness” and “weird formations” of the White River Badlands of South Dakota, as well as their vibrant red hues and curious name.

They walked a few blocks, camped in an alley, and ate breakfast. Earl bought milk from a dairy truck. The milkman questioned him while the kids played cards and wrote in their journals. The children washed their mess kits, washed themselves, and Earl shined each hiker’s shoes. As always, several people they encountered that day stared at the group and asked questions.

After making a brief stop at the chamber of commerce, Earl went into a local store to mail postcards. When he returned, Albert informed him that a “policeman had talked with them,” adding, “He asked me what I was going to do with that bayonet, and I said: ‘That is to kill snakes with or cut down trees’ . . . he did ask us what we were doing and where we were going. Then he smiled and left us.” They walked further on and came to the outskirts of Rapid City. Earl noted that the children were tired and sleepy. Some napped, others played cards. A Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) truck stopped and provided a fifteen-mile ride, then



The Neller and Kincaid kids often played cards and whittled sticks to pass the time at stops along their journey.

let them off near a stream where the group bathed and washed their clothes.¹⁸

Earl and the kids climbed a steep bank “near a rock as large as a house” and finished off a can of peaches. “Now see who can drop the first peach,” Earl joked; it was common for at least one child to drop something during a meal. They went back to their gear and soon fell asleep. Earl’s last entry for the day mentioned that many CCC workers “passed by on their way to a dance.”

18. This marked the first of many interactions between Civilian Conservation Corps workers and the Neller-Kincaid group in the Black Hills. For more on the CCC in the Black Hills see C. N. Alleger, comp., *Civilian Conservation Corps, South Dakota District History: That the Work of Young America May Be Recorded* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Johnston and Bordewyk, Inc., 1933, 1934, 1936); George A. Larson, “A CCC Recruit Looks Back: Claire Patterson’s Black Hills Experience,” *South Dakota History* 35 (Winter 2005): 335–46; Lyle Derschied, *The Civilian Conservation Corps in South Dakota, 1933–1942: A Historical Report Sponsored by Chapter 61 of NACCCA* (Brookings, S.Dak.: SDSU Foundation Press, 1986); Alice Davis Smith “CCC Camps in the Black Hills,” paper presented at the Fifth Annual West River History Conference, 1997, pp. 16–32; Peggy Sanders, *The Civilian Conservation Corp: In and Around the Black Hills* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2004); Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 110–13.

Sunday, 25 June

The travelers arose at five, too cold to sleep. Earl helped Elaine and Mildred and started them down the road, followed by Virgil and Albert, then Dora and Carolyn. They hiked for three hours and stopped for another oatmeal breakfast. Earl noted, "Some of the C.C.C. men talked with us in the meantime, as they were taking their Sunday morning stroll." They started off again at ten and Earl noticed that as the temperature rose, the water supply shrank. Virgil broke his glass water jar, "dashing it to smithereens." A few of them had aluminum canteens which they filled at a farmhouse. The farmer described a shortcut that would lead to an old shack, saying, "A man lives there who will put you on the right track."

More instructions followed: "He told me that, if I would follow a certain cow path after leaving the shack, I would cut my journey to Keystone by about one and one-half miles. That was something to be considered." But the perceived shortcut "did not take into account the ups and downs of the hills and valleys. How it did make us puff and sweat to climb!" Nevertheless, "We enjoyed the odor of the pines very much. The air was very fresh and clear. One just wanted to open his nostrils as far as possible. There were also some good running brooks."

Earl and the children continued along the shortcut and arrived at the shack, where "a savage looking police dog blocked our way." Earl shouted over the barking dog, hoping to alert the shack's occupant. No response. He wrote, "that animal looked more like a wolf than a dog. We might kill him, but he could do a lot of biting first." A "black haired, dark eyed, copper skinned mountaineer" finally appeared. The mountaineer described the rest of the route, using a stick to draw a map in the dirt and admonishing the group to keep "always to the right as you go along."

But it soon became clear that would be easier said than done. As the group learned, "too many trails seemed to lead off from the main cow path. Possibly they all would lead to the same place, but it was not pleasant to be uncertain." They reached the garden from the mountaineer's map and stopped for lunch. Earl and the children restarted at two o'clock and hiked through the many changes in elevation, "This mountain climbing was a little more than we could stand. My! How much farther could it be? . . . Sometimes, backwoodsmen do not give clear

directions. Still, we had some faith left.” It was hot, there was no breeze, and their water ran low. As Earl described it:

We had not yet learned that water in most any creek is always good in the Black Hills. . . . There was no sign of the end. If anything, the trees became thicker; and the path was more overgrown. At last, it seemed to go in two directions and the best one to the left. We were to keep to the right. We set down our packs and I went on ahead in the left one, then the right one. It seemed that the latter just went down to the creek. But these extra steps were beginning to tell on me. Possibly we were lost! Maybe we had taken the wrong path! It might prove to be very distressing to have to remain in this wild country all night.

The four youngest children became frustrated as each wanted to be in the lead. “They became very tired, and their feet became sore so that it was hard for them to go on . . . They did say that they wished that we had taken the main traveled road to Keystone. But they knew that we



Earl and the children trekked through the backwoods in the Black Hills to cut distance off their hike from Rapid City to Keystone, but the “shortcut” proved to be strenuous. Here, the children are shown carrying their supplies through part of the overgrown path.

could find our way back. Our only question then would be one of food and water.” As they walked, the path became more worn. They spotted hoofprints and newly cut timber. Suddenly, they emerged onto the main highway about half a mile from Keystone.

Once in Keystone, Virgil, Albert, and Earl bought bread, milk, cheese, pickles (mainly for a new water jar), and “Baby Ruth” candy bars. When they returned, “some men and children were besieging the girls with questions. It was not long before some of the village girls wanted Mildred and Elaine to come over to play. Another group of boys wanted Virgil and Albert. Of course they could go! Why shouldn’t they? They had traveled all day without murmuring at all. If you could only have seen them run and play two hours later, you would have wondered if they ever got tired.”

A local man came over and asked where they would sleep. Earl thought to spend the night by the creek, but the man warned, “You had better not. Sometimes the creek overflows its banks in one night.” He offered Earl a spot next to his own house and use of the front room for shelter if it rained. “You are very kind, sir, and we may be obliged to accept your offer,” Earl said. Dora and Carolyn studied French, played cards, and later chatted with two high school-aged girls. Another local man talked with Earl about places of interest in the Black Hills: “By all means,” he suggested, “we should not miss the Rushmore Memorial with the mighty face of Washington carved out on the mountain in granite, one of the most gigantic attempts of its kind in all ages.” The monument was still nearly a decade away from its completion at that point.

There was one last bit of excitement that day. Virgil yelled, “May we stay over here a little longer to help hold a dog? It has some porcupine quills in its nose.” Earl shouted back in agreement, and it was not long before the boys returned with quills for souvenirs. For the first time in the travel journal, Earl provided one of the children’s accounts of the day. Elaine, offering a simplified version of events, recorded:

We got up at 5:00 o’clock. Mildred and I started to walk first. We stopped about two times but did not wait for the others . . . The next time we stopped, we ate our breakfast and wrote in our diaries. In the afternoon, a man told us a short cut through the woods. When we ended, we came out where there was a dump for old cars . . . The boys went with daddy

to the store to buy things to eat. While they were down there a man and woman came over and talked with us. After daddy came home, the man told daddy that we could sleep in his pasture. After we were done eating, I went to a girl's house. They built a campfire and I staid to watch it for a while. After a while, I went to bed.

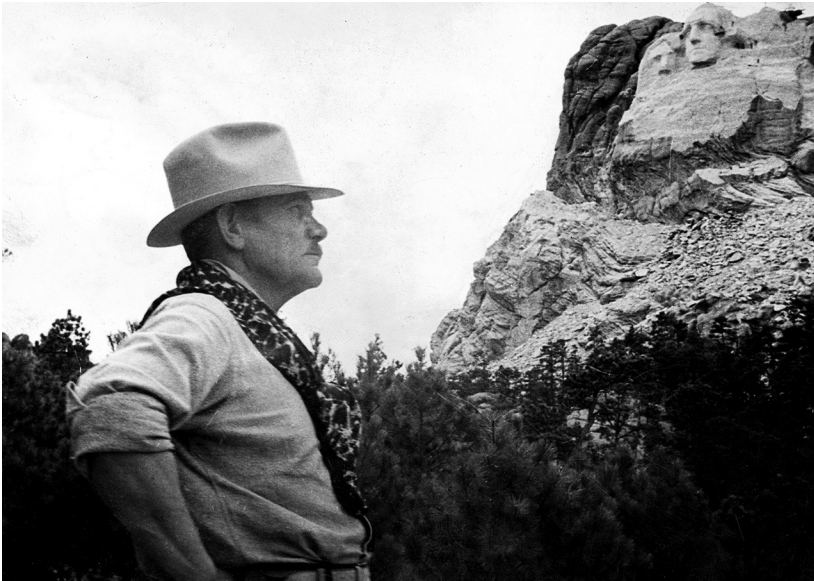
Monday, 26 June

Earl and the children slept in that morning. As on previous days, they rolled their packs, found some shade, washed up, and ate breakfast. Virgil and Albert went to the store and bought two quarts of milk, but Virgil once again dropped and broke his bottle. Carolyn and Dora swam with the high school girls they met the day before; Earl quoted Carolyn as writing, "Dora and I went swimming with Winifred and Betty Owens."¹⁹ Before leaving Keystone, they "bought some meat, oranges, onions, six loaves of bread, two large cans of beans, two large cans of peaches, two quarts of milk, oatmeal, cornmeal, and sugar. After eating again, we went toward Rushmore Mountain."

On the way to Rushmore, they stopped at a tourist camp featuring a telescope that "was a thrill to the children." As Carolyn wrote, "We looked through and could see the men working on the Rushmore Monument, although about five miles off." Earl noted Elaine's enthusiasm in particular: "It is surprising how a little girl could become so excited over anything that she had never looked through before . . . So we all walked up in the little tower to sight Washington's face through the telescope. It really did give us the best view of the face that we had on the whole trip. . . . This surely is one of the most wonderful memorials that man has ever attempted to produce." Earl then provided an elaborate description of Mount Rushmore, quoting from an unknown brochure:

Dwarfing the Sphinx or the Pyramids, or any of the other ancient wonders that from time immemorial man has used as a basis of comparison are the heads of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt which

19. The National Park Service lists a Ben Owens as a carver on Mount Rushmore (<https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/the-workers.htm>). In the 1930 United States Federal Census, Ben Owens and his wife Elizabeth lived in Meade County and had two daughters: Winifred (age fourteen) and Elizabeth "Betty" (age eleven) Owens.



Sculptor Gutzon Borglum poses in front of his most famous work, Mount Rushmore, in August 1933, just over a month after the Neller-Kincaid group visited.

when completed will stand on Rushmore Mountain for millions of years to come as a memorial to the principles on which our country was founded and on which it has existed. . . . The work is being carried on under the direction of Gutzon Borglum, famous sculptor, who planned the Memorial and has carried it to its present stage.²⁰

The group then walked to a Conoco filling station that promoted itself as a museum and featured a variety of Black Hills stones. The children had “incidentally began the hobby of stone hunting.” They continued, “through the hot sun, uphill all the way, on the white stone graveled road. Much mica was mixed in with the gravel.” The travelers reached a fork in the road, one to Mount Rushmore and the other to Iron Mountain Road, where they stopped, made camp, and ate. Earl guarded the

20. At certain points within the travel journal, Earl reproduced detailed descriptions that he clearly copied from various travel brochures obtained along the journey. These brochures were key parts of tourist culture at the time. As one scholar notes, “Despite their diversity in form, this eclectic literature shared the desire to celebrate the experience of touring, and in the process defined the popular touring experience in subjective terms.” Shaffer, *See America First*, p. 224.



The six children pose for this image on Iron Mountain Road. Mount Rushmore is between Albert and Elaine in the distant background.

packs while the kids hiked the extra two miles for a better look at Washington's face. Left alone, he washed his feet and soothed his blisters in a cool stream. Not long after, "I heard the voices of the children coming back from Rushmore. They had enjoyed the trip immensely, but the girls had had some difficulty in making the boys mind. All the children now washed their feet and prepared to sleep." Just after supper, Carolyn recorded, "daddy showed Dora how to use the camera."

Tuesday, 27 June

The next morning, Earl once again woke the children in pairs and sent them on their way, following behind as they hiked—endlessly it seemed—on Iron Mountain Road. "Up—up—up! How long could it last! We came to a pig-tail curve and crossed over to the bridge. . . . We were all getting very tired. Virgil could scarcely keep up. Albert seemed to stand it well. . . . So they went on, almost too fast and farther ahead than

I could hike myself. If I could have called to them to stop, I would have. I was completely exhausted.” They reached the first tunnel on Iron Mountain Road and regrouped. From here Washington’s face could be seen quite easily. Breakfast was cornmeal with brown sugar. The children “thought this was delicious . . . hungry bears will eat most anything.” In the Black Hills, it was easier to find good water to drink and for cleaning up.²¹

The explorers continued on Iron Mountain Road. A car, driven by a married couple bound for the Needles Highway, approached Earl and Albert at the back of the line. They observed that Earl and Albert looked very tired. The “gentleman” offered to give them a ride. “There are quite a few of us,” Earl explained, “But you could take a few of the younger children and our packs and let us larger ones walk on foot.” Earl and Albert stood on the car’s running boards for a short way as they caught up to the rest of the children.

The “kind lady” stated to her husband, “It would be too bad to leave them here alone in all this heat. See how tired they look, the darling little girls. And what heavy packs they have! Maybe we can take the four youngest?” Ultimately, the husband agreed to transport the four younger children and the packs to the Needles Highway, turning at the “Custer Cut Off.” Earl instructed the couple, “Then let Albert, the oldest boy, off at [Custer Cut Off], so that we don’t get mixed up and go in the wrong direction. Take the rest of the children and our packs to the Needles Highway.” The car left and Dora, Carolyn, and Earl walked on without their heavy packs or the youngest four children. “We were under the impression from the man’s statement,” Earl wrote, “that the place to where Albert would be was about four miles. After an hour’s hike, we were at the top of Iron Mountain.”

21. A description of Iron Mountain Road in *South Dakota HIWAY Magazine* from June 1933 noted, “The road is quite mad. Alice in Wonderland would have taken it with her usual placidity, and there’s probably a dormouse or a Mad Hatter somewhere in the birch-woods . . . A majestic curve, and blue distance and there is Washington . . . The road dips into birch-woods whose white boughs are untouched by the irrelevancy of leaves . . . Climb up the mountain, and blueness falls dizzily away at your side. Under a log bridge, the sweep of a curve, and you’re over it . . . There is not, perhaps, another road like it in the world. It is simply, as we said in the beginning, mad.” *South Dakota HIWAY Magazine*, South Dakota Highway Commission, June 1933, p. 9; Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 118–21.



Iron Mountain Road in Custer State Park, as Neller discovered, was free of any unnecessary services and facilities: “No hot dog stands or other eyesores dot the side of the road.”

The travel journal then included another long, detailed description, most likely copied from a travel brochure, of Custer State Park: “Unique in its mountain topography, favored by a delightful climate, and covered everywhere with a wealth of varied vegetation, it is one of the most delightful recreational areas open to the public anywhere.” “Because the Park is under the control of the State of South Dakota,” the passage concluded, “no commercialization, aside from such accommodations as are necessary to take care of visitors, is permitted. No hot dog stands or other eyesores dot the side of the road.”²²

Earl, Dora, and Carolyn found the descent on Iron Mountain Road more tolerable. The three hikers caught another car ride to the Custer

22. For histories of Custer State Park, see *A Vacation Guide to Custer State Park in the Black Hills* (Pierre: State Publishing Company, 1938); Thomas S. Baskett Jr. and Jerry Sanders, *An Introduction to Custer State Park and the Southern Black Hills* (Billings, MT: RAWCO, 1977); Jessie Y. Sundstrom, *Pioneers and Custer State Park: A History of Custer State Park and Northcentral Custer County* (Custer, S.Dak.: By the Author, 1994); Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 41–48.

Cut-Off. "But when we came to where Albert should have been, there was no Albert to be found. I got out of the car. I shouted as loud as I could. No answer. I looked around. He was nowhere to be seen. Now I was puzzled and slightly alarmed. Was this really the right place? Yes, there was the sign: 'CUSTER CUT-OFF.' Perhaps, he was afraid and had gone on. We tried to hope so." The three hikers continued to the Needles Highway to meet up with the younger children, where they also hoped to find Albert.

As they approached, Earl saw the children sitting under a small shade tree by a brook. "Where is Albert?" asked Mildred. Earl replied, "Albert! Isn't he here?" "We left him down at the corner, where you told us to," Elaine said. "A shiver went over us and the smile went from our faces. You can imagine how these brave little youngsters felt, so hungry that they could wait no longer, tired, foot sore, and Albert lost." It was roughly four to five miles back to the crossroads. Earl didn't know what to do. As they deliberated, a half-ton Model T truck came by with a man, woman, and their child. "I yelled and ran up to him. He stopped his car, eyeing me sharply. With my curled up mustache and brown beard, he must have thought that I meant business." Earl asked if someone could get a ride back to the crossroads to look for Albert. The man agreed, "But now it was a question of who should go," Earl wrote. "Carolyn, Dora, and I had just been there, and knew that we had looked around and yelled loud enough to be heard a long way. It didn't seem just right to send one of the two little girls there."

"I'll go!" Virgil volunteered. "Do you think you could find your way back all alone, if he isn't there?" Earl asked. "Yes, I know I could." Virgil took Elaine's small canteen and some food and hopped into the truck. "There he went all alone in search of his little playmate. He was still hungry and still tired and only eight years old." Roughly two hours later, Virgil returned with Albert. He had fallen asleep waiting for Dora, Carolyn, and Earl to arrive and just awakened when Virgil found him. The two young boys ate and returned to the group. Together again, they all decided to wash their clothes. Earl and Elaine went to a nearby cottage for milk; the lady there also gave them cookies and volunteered to drive to a nearby store for groceries. Earl provided her money and a list of items. Later that evening, the man who gave Virgil a ride to the crossroads returned to see if they found Albert. Like most people they

encountered, he became interested in Earl and the children's story and its outcome.

Earl's original plan was to take the Needles Highway to Sylvan Lake, go south to Custer and Hot Springs, and retrace part of the journey back to Sylvan Lake. A local man pointed out that there were few stores or farmhouses that way and suggested a shorter route directly to Hot Springs, up through Custer to Sylvan Lake, and back along the Needles Highway. With this insight, Earl changed his plan and the group headed to Hot Springs. Earl wrote, "And thus it was that we were to soon learn that we would never know where our bed would be at night, whether we would be wet or cold or hungry, or when we would arrive in Hebron, N.D."

Here occurred one of the few incidents regarding the personal safety of the Neller-Kincaid group: "Just as we were ready to retire, an old looking, dirty tramp stopped on the other side of the road, passing and repassing us three times. I loaded my gun and placed it in a more convenient place. Dora and Carolyn also had their trench knives close to their heads. I lay there trying to stay awake; but my eyes just would not stay open. Two or three times I woke up with a start. At last I fell into a sound sleep."

Wednesday, 28 June

Earl changed the group's early morning routine on Wednesday. He let the boys sleep in but allowed the girls—first Mildred and Elaine and then Dora and Carolyn—to get a head start. The older girls felt it was "too hard to catch up" to Albert and Virgil and hoped to avoid hiking through the heat of the day. "We would just go the four and a half miles to Legion Lake and rest up," Earl wrote.

Earl saw Virgil waiting ahead on the road. "I don't want to walk with those kids," Virgil stated, "They always halloo at me, and fuss because I walk too fast . . . let me help you carry the stove." Earl was impressed by his son's offer but did not want to "spoil the balance" of each arm's evenly distributed weight. Though rebuffed, Virgil was content to walk beside his father. Later on, Albert and Virgil took turns carrying Mildred's pack. "It was interesting to see how considerate they all were of one another," Earl wrote.

RAPID CITY
GATEWAY TO THE

BLACK HILLS

OF
SOUTH DAKOTA

A MOUNTAIN VACATION LAND

The Rapid City Chamber of Commerce published this 1932 travel guide to the Black Hills. In his travel diary, Earl Neller borrowed from tour guides like this one to describe some of the area attractions.

Earl's writing reflected the mental and physical monotony of the trip: "We marched. We rested. We marched. We rested. We marched again. We rested again. It just seemed that we never could get used to making long hikes at a stretch." He noted that each child carried about seventeen pounds in their packs, and he carried roughly fifty pounds. After three and a half miles, the group stopped for breakfast: shredded wheat and oatmeal. While the oatmeal cooked, Carolyn and Dora combed their hair. Earl recorded, "Albert decided to go without sugar as punishment for worrying us so much the day before, the brave little fellow."

The sky grew darker, the weather became more threatening, and raindrops started to fall occasionally. The fear of getting drenched distressed the group. With Carolyn's shoulders "awfully sore" under the weight of her backpack, they hiked to a state forester's residence, which would make a good shelter if it rained. The children played cards until "a truck came that would take us seven or eight miles farther." The driver took the group "back of Mt. Coolidge." After letting them off, the driver explained, "You will find the C.C.C. Camp about a mile ahead. Perhaps they will be going to Hot Springs." Earl and the children wanted to help the man load up poles in his truck, but again it started to sprinkle. Earl remarked, "At any rate we were again right in a place where it was even more difficult to buy food than before. There was only one choice, more hiking."

Carolyn recounted that the hikers intended to find a ride at the camp, but after only a short walk, a sedan stopped, loaded up the group and their gear, and took them five miles down the road to a state-owned farmhouse, about two-and-a-half miles below Blue Bell Lodge. They found water and ate bread and beans for lunch. The two boys thoroughly inspected a large pile of antlers in front of the state farmhouse, and Earl reported having seen deer earlier in the morning.

Later that day, Earl and Virgil took a nap at the farmhouse. Earl awoke to the sound of the children yelling, "Give us a ride! Give us a ride!" They waved down a truck with Wyoming license plates bound for Hot Springs. Everyone jumped in. They passed by Wind Cave, spotting a bison along the way. A heavy rain shower greeted them as they entered Hot Springs, where they observed a stream "large enough to cover the tire of an automobile" rushing down the gutter. Mildred, Virgil, and Earl went to the store to buy food. On the way, they found the Min-



During their journey, the Nellers and Kincaids received rides from and interacted with various Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers like the one that appears in this photograph.

nekahta Open Air Plunge. According to a description Earl included in the journal, “the healing qualities of the hot waters, bubbling from the rocks, have caused clinics and hospitals to be established.”

After Dora, Elaine, and Carolyn waited by a garage for what Carolyn described as “a long time,” Earl, Virgil, and Mildred appeared with arms full of “two dozen eggs, two pounds of potatoes, seven bananas, one dozen oranges, one loaf of bread, one square of butter, one quart of milk, six suckers, and one pound of brown sugar.” The hikers set up “right on the sidewalk, and for the first time the children had all that they could eat.” Carolyn declared, “This is the best meal I have ever eaten.”

A local man from the nearby state veterans’ home, founded shortly after statehood to provide medical care and housing for war veterans living in South Dakota, stopped and asked where they were from and where they had been. He then queried Earl, “How do you find the people here?” Earl replied, “Rather cold and distant. I have never been in a town before where so few people paid any attention to us.” The local man responded, “There are always lots of strangers in this city for treatments, and that probably accounts for it.” He then asked

where they were going to spend the night; Earl answered, "Out on the ground somewhere." The rather astonished man then asked whether Earl feared the children would get sick sleeping outside. "Sometimes I am," Earl responded, "but they have done very well so far." The visitor wished them good luck and left.

A while later, the same man, who Earl now referred to as "the old soldier," came back and guided the group to Kidney Springs and the Evans Hotel, where they could send mail. The water at Kidney Springs, Carolyn wrote, tasted "worse than castor oil." The old soldier also invited them to a church service, which they attended, except for Mildred and Virgil, who were guarding the backpacks. By the time they reached that night's camp near a creek on the other side of Evan's Plunge, "We merely unrolled our packs without spreading the blankets out; for the sky was black and lightning was flashing in the distance. About midnight it cleared up and became cooler."

Thursday, 29 June

The group spent the day in Hot Springs. Earl built a small fire that morning while the kids slept in. Mildred, the last to rise, remarked, "My! It seems good to sleep for once." Earl used the small stove to prepare cornmeal mixed with shredded wheat, milk, and brown sugar, which the children enjoyed.

After breakfast, they went to the Minnekahta Open Air Plunge for about an hour. Earl referenced the warm water, but the pool was "just a little too deep for the children to enjoy it." After they returned to camp, Earl went to the Evans Hotel "to cash ten dollars, bought some cards for the children, and carried home five pounds of spuds, one jar of peanut butter, three cans of spaghetti, one loaf of whole wheat bread and one-half pound of meat." They gorged themselves, washed clothes, took naps, and entertained another visitor from the sanitarium.

Earl, Dora, Carolyn, Mildred, and Elaine then explored Battle Mountain Sanitarium, founded as a treatment facility for veterans in 1907. As Earl explained, "We did not have time to go through then; but the children went over to see a monument on Battle Mountain, while I went to the post office. It seems that this was called Battle Mountain, because of the bloody struggles between various Indian tribes for the possession of these medicinal springs."



In Hot Springs, the Nellers and Kincaids met several “old soldiers” and visited the Battle Mountain Sanitarium. The four-story sandstone structure was built in 1907 to treat war veterans experiencing respiratory issues such as tuberculosis.

Earl procured another large haul of provisions. “I took to our camp almost more groceries than we could carry. Four large cans of peaches, one of plums, one of pineapple, three small cans of pork and beans, seven bananas, eight oranges, one square of butter, three loaves of bread, one large box of oatmeal, one pound of salt, and a few other things. We had a hard time carrying everything to camp, because they were heavy and bulky.” They ate another filling supper which included “watercress from the stream.” That night, Earl noted, “a stiff breeze came up. My throat became a little dry and uncomfortable.”

As Elaine described the day in her diary, “When we were out of the plunge and dressed, we started to go to the camp. Daddy sent the two older girls to watch the packs. He took the other children with him to the store. When we got back to the camp, daddy started to get dinner

ready. . . . We played cards a long time. Then we wrote in our diaries. After a while we went up to the Battle Mountain Sanitarium. We saw the hills where the Indians fought. We went over to a monument where the soldiers were buried. Daddy didn't go with us to the monument."

Friday, 30 June

A cold wind woke Earl and the children on Friday morning. "We often wonder what is in store for us as we leave for a new place," Earl wrote. "Somehow, we hated to part with this place, because of the proximity to a warm stream filled with watercress, and the better meals that we enjoyed. Evans Plunge with its famous baths was only a stone's throw away. . . . Down the railroad track, past the filling station, up the road we pushed against a stiff wind. Time after time our hats blew off."

They hiked only a mile and a half out of town before Virgil, Carolyn, and Albert returned to Hot Springs to buy milk and bread. Earl warmed up the small stove and everyone had oatmeal and an orange. "On we struggled again against that hard wind." They stopped at a farmhouse to wash their mess kits. "We did not dare to use our canteen supply, because we never knew when we might be dumped off where good water was not easily accessible." A kind lady in the farmhouse brought them a gallon pail of water to wash their mess kits and filled one of their quart bottles with milk.²³ "We have lots of milk, and it will only go to waste," she said. "I'm not used to such kindness," Earl intoned. When the woman asked where they were headed, he responded, "We want to see Wind Cave. Then we are going to Custer."

The woman replied that her husband "works on the road and often goes that way. If he only knew it, he would take you." Right then, the group saw the man driving down the road. He stopped for the children waving him down. Earl thanked the woman for her help, and the group prepared to head north.

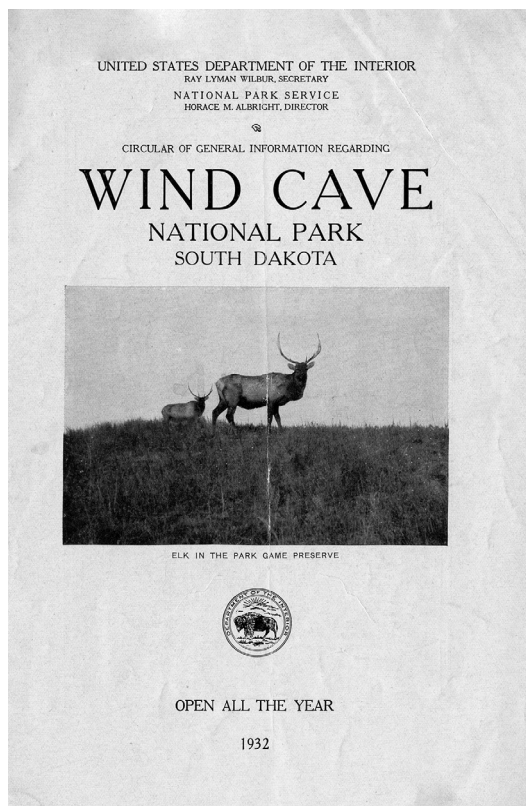
23. Earl and the children stopped at numerous farmhouses and met several "kind ladies" during their trek. As historian Paula Nelson has described the role of women in this place and time, "Men may have been the economic mainstays of west river farms . . . but women filled important roles as economic producers, wives, mothers, and as hearts of the homes of the region." Nelson adds, "Women carried out their traditional duties as the processors and preparers of food, as manufacturers of clothing and products such as soap, as housewives, and as mothers." Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), p. 39.

The truck driven by the kind lady's husband was full of tarred gravel, and Earl pondered, "how anyone could get off without being black. I sat on my shoes and balanced myself by putting my hand on one of the fellow's shoulders." "As soon as we arrived at the cave itself," Earl explained, "we took gasoline and tried to clean off the tar. It is surprising how little there was on us."

Once at Wind Cave National Park, the group sought out additional information.²⁴ In the journal, Earl copied information, likely from a brochure, that explained that the park "was created by Congress in 1903, and now embraces 12,089.6 acres." The description continued: "Its topography is peculiar to that of the lower elevations of the Black Hills. In a general way the park might be said to be arid; that is, it has no rivers, lakes, or big streams, and therefore no fishing." It claimed the crystal formations inside the cave were "too varied and too numerous to permit description here. . . . Although windy at, and in the immediate vicinity of the entrance, the inner portions are calm and still, and the temperature of between 45 and 47 degrees winter and summer, is just comfortable for walking. The wind at the entrance is the cave's strangest phenomenon. It is believed to be caused by changes in the atmospheric pressure outside."

The group chose to take the Garden of Eden tour of the cave, which was the shortest route and started at ten that morning. Earl described a few notable scenes from the tour. "As we started to go down, down into the cave," he wrote, "one of the ladies thought that she would faint. She rushed back up the narrow stairway for more air. Of course she was just afraid. Her husband coaxed her to come back. As she descended again she often murmured that she wished she had taken some stimulant . . .

24. For more on Wind Cave, see Edward C. Horn, *Mazes and Marvels of Wind Cave* (Hot Springs, S.Dak.: Hot Springs Star, 1901); U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Wind Cave National Park South Dakota* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933); John W. Bohi, "Seventy-Five Years at Wind Cave: A History of the National Park," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 31 (1962): 365–468; John Tyers, *The Natural History Story of Wind Cave National Park* (Hot Springs, S.Dak.: Wind Cave Natural History Associations); U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Wind Cave: National Park, South Dakota* (Washington, D.C.: Division of Publications, 1979); Arthur Palmer, *Wind Cave: An Ancient World Beneath the Hills* (Hot Springs, S.Dak.: Black Hills Parks and Forests Association, 1995); Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and Badlands*, pp. 149–53.



Earl Neller may have drawn his detailed description of Wind Cave from this 1932 booklet produced by the National Park Service.

At various places along the route the guide would cry out, 'Low bridge! Low bridge!'" Earl and the children spent two hours underground in the chilly cave.

Back at camp they lunched, napped, and played cards. At two in the afternoon, they took the Fairground route, which lasted three hours. "It was better than the other one," Earl remarked. "Stairs and bridges have been built at all unusually rough or precipitous points, and the ceilings, which occasionally attain a height of over one hundred feet, are in all places high enough so that little crouching is necessary. The box-like formations were wonderful. How little the most of us know about the mighty workings of nature!"

After the second tour they returned to camp, ate supper, and as Earl remarked, "mused ourselves a while." One last bit of excitement ended the day: "Soon after dark a car drove in to look for a place to stay over-

night. I was afraid that he would run over us, so I suggested to him a good place to pitch his tent.”

Saturday, 1 July

“Hurry! Hurry! Here’s a fellow wants to take us with him,” Albert yelled on that first of July morning. He and Virgil, the first to wake and leave camp, had found a ride before anyone else was ready to leave. “What a picture we must have presented to that man as one by one, seven of us came over the brow of the hill!” Seeing a small coupe disappointed Earl. How would all seven of them and the packs fit?

Well, if [the driver] thought so, I did too. The four girls rode in the front with the driver. How? I don’t know. The packs alone filled the back end. Still we sat on top of them, and let the cover come down on our heads. Then he started to go. I next noticed that the spare tire support was cracked a little. He kept going faster. It must have been forty or fifty miles an hour. That seemed too dangerous to me. A little curve in the road might throw us off. I slipped my foot down on the bumper but Albert had none. Virgil was in the middle. I put my arm around him, and had Albert do it too.

Earl remarked to Virgil, “If that iron breaks that you have your foot on, don’t get excited, but try to find a firm place until we can stop the driver.” He continued:

Our necks were just about broken. Still we sped on! I had not asked him where we were going; I had trusted to the children and supposed that the direction was all right. Evidently, he was late for work. As he went around a curve, there was danger of sliding off. Eight, nine, ten miles really how far was he going? Rather, how far could we stand it? Virgil, finally, took both his hands and extended them forward above his head to hold up the cover. This relieved our heads and necks some and made him more secure. We could stand a lot of punishment to get a ‘lift’ so early in the morning. By 6:30 we had traveled twelve or fifteen miles and were again in front of the C.C.C. Camp that we had passed on our way to Hot Springs.

Having thanked the man for the harrowing ride, the group walked to a farmhouse with a sign that read “Private. Keep Out,” but as Earl

explained, “we walked in just the same.” They found another helpful woman at this farmhouse. They bought more milk, but she had already sold all her eggs. Earl ignited the small stove and made oatmeal. They hiked on five miles toward their next destination, the Annie Tallent Monument.

The group expected to reach Custer that day to buy groceries. They took breaks when necessary, and the children whittled sticks. “On we labored under those packs in that hot sun, over that dusty road,” Earl wrote. “The hike was testing our strength.” During one of their breaks, Virgil sat down, put his head back on his pack, and closed his eyes. A group of ladies in a car saw Virgil and stopped, thinking he was sick. “No. He isn’t sick,” Earl explained, “but he is almost exhausted. We have come from Wind Cave this morning and have walked a very long way.” “Can’t we take him with us?” asked one of the ladies. “How far are you going?” “We want to stop at the Tallent Monument,” Earl replied. “I believe it is about a mile farther. You can take him and our packs too, if you wish. That will help us a lot.” Virgil and the packs went in the touring car. “We piled the stuff on top of their laps, on the fenders, and anywhere we could get it. The last mile was a hot one, but it was comforting to get there.”

Earl’s travel journal noted the inscription at the monument erected by the Society of Black Hills Pioneers: “In memory of Anna [sic] Donna Tallent. . . . The first white woman to enter the Black Hills, arriving in Custer City in December 1874.” They rested at the monument, then went to the Gordon Stockade, about three hundred feet from the road. “It has been reconstructed,” Earl noted, “so that the visitor may see how these pioneers spent the winter inside its log walls.” More descriptions detailing the history of the Gordon Stockade followed.²⁵

25. The interpretation of the stockade’s importance that Earl offers here reflects larger trends. As one historian explains, “Celebrating the past was important to a sense of nationhood, statehood, and locality. It was educational as a means of orientation to one’s cultural heritage, but above all, visiting historical attractions could be entertaining and relaxing.” Jakle, *The Tourist*, p. 286. Yet another historian adds, “In seeing the sights of America history and the landscapes of the nation, tourists experienced firsthand the character and nuances of the nation, and their narratives overflow with references to the various American types and the distinct American places they surveyed.” Shaffer, *See America First*, p. 228.



After the group hiked through Wind Cave National Park, they rested at the Annie Tallent Monument east of Custer off U.S. Highway 16. Pictured from left to right are Carolyn Neller, Elaine Neller, Mildred Kincaid, Albert Kincaid, Virgil Neller, and Dora Kincaid.

After Earl took a photo of the kids at the Tallent Monument, they washed up in French Creek, ate lunch, and waited for a ride to Custer. As Earl explained, “We had walked so far on the hot dusty road already with our heavy load, that we did not care to walk another three and a half miles. It seemed that the extra weight on our shoulders caused us to have more blisters on our feet. It began to look as if five miles was a good hike with all the luggage that we had. I lay down and soon fell asleep.”

A truck stopped around three-thirty that afternoon and took them to Custer. “What a relief!” Earl declared. “It was Saturday and hundreds of people were in town to buy their groceries. I bought a few supplies, which we ate immediately. Then we cut across the lots to a hill covered with pine trees overlooking the city from the north.” Earl, Carolyn, Dora, and Virgil went back to the store and bought more groceries: several canned goods, brown sugar, onions, plums, milk, peanut butter,

and six loaves of bread. Earl exclaimed they were “not going to starve on Sunday.” They slept on a pine-covered hill north of Custer. All were tired and sore. Earl made a final, prescient note: “We hoped it wouldn’t rain.”

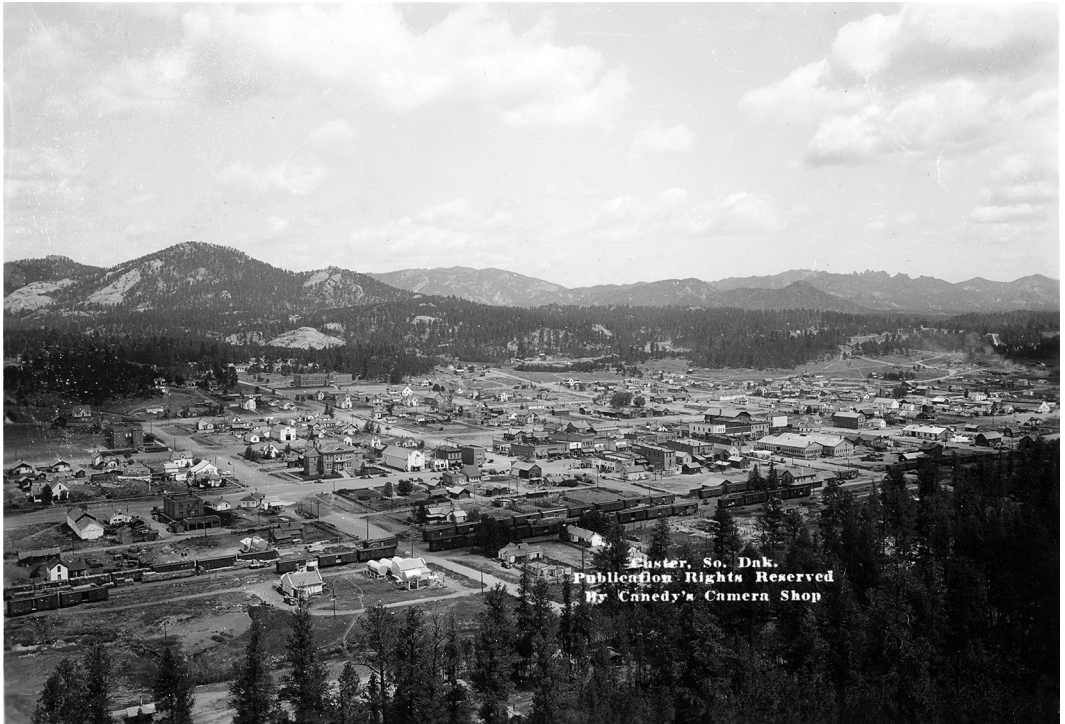
Sunday, 2 July

Earl had slept poorly, as the camp was on a slope. Describing the scene from camp, Earl observed that French Creek “was as black as coal owing to the operations of the gold miners above stream.” He heated some water and shaved. The children had hard-boiled eggs and oatmeal with two tablespoons of brown sugar for breakfast. Earl, making a correlation between sugar intake and general health, noted, “Candy was usually taboo on our trip. We did not dare run any chance of getting sick.” Carolyn went into Custer to buy a copy of the *Denver Post*. The children read the funnies and played cards. Then, “We took a walk to see one of the original log cabins built by Custer’s troops. In it we found an extensive collection of relics from old Indian days. In another building was an old stagecoach.” Dora noted in her diary that the group “saw [the] old Custer-Sylvan Lake stagecoach that ran in 1876. It was under water in Sylvan Lake five years. Then it was raised to show to the public as a relic.” The hitchhikers also visited Artcrafters Studio, where “a variety of articles made from an infinite number of different rocks from the Hills dazzled our eyes. The chimney alone had more than two hundred different varieties of stone.”²⁶

The group wanted to go to Jewel Cave.²⁷ Inquiries at different spots led them to “the home of the man who was in charge of it. The people living in his house took us out there.” As described in the travel journal, Jewel Cave “was of an entirely different nature. Its walls and ceilings scintillated with myriad reflections of colored gems and crystals. Crys-

26. The South Dakota Federal Writers’ Project, tasked with creating a guide to the state’s attractions, would include also Scott’s Rose Quartz Company Store and Artcrafters Studio on their list of stops to make in Custer. Federal Writers’ Project, *A South Dakota Guide* (Pierre: State Publishing Company, 1938), pp. 304–5.

27. For history and descriptions of Jewel Cave see Herb and Jan Conn, *The Jewel Cave Adventure: Fifty Miles of Discovery under South Dakota* (Teaneck, N.J.: Zephyrus Press, 1976); James B. Thompson, *The Geology of Jewel Cave* (Hot Springs, S.Dak.: Wind Cave Natural History Association, 1978); Arthur Palmer, *Jewel Cave: A Gift from the Past* (Hot Springs, S.Dak.: Black Hills Parks and Forests Association, 1995).



The group's view of Custer from their camp on a hill north of town would have looked similar to the one shown on this postcard.

tals of this cave were better than those of Crystal Cave itself, which we were to see later on. No painter could do the coloring so well. However, it was not electrically lighted as was Wind Cave; and the man charged us five times as much as we paid at Wind Cave and two times as much as we later paid at Crystal Cave." In her diary, Dora named a Mr. Davis, who let them take souvenirs, as caretaker of the cave. Earl tried to give the driver a fifty-cent tip for the ride, but the man refused, remarking "that he had always wanted to visit it himself."

Back in Custer they went to a rock shop and museum called Scott's Studio, "where we saw all sorts of stones, especially the beautiful rose quartz. The children filled their pockets full. There was also a fence made out of petrified logs." They went back to their camp among the pine trees and ate pork and beans with pineapple. Earl and the children wrote in their diaries and went to bed.



After Carolyn purchased a copy of the *Denver Post* in Custer, the children read the newspaper—or at least the Sunday comics—on this pine-forested hillside in the Black Hills.

It rained that night: “The sky had been cloudy, but we had not reckoned on it raining. One drop, two drops, three drops, slowly the rain began to fall. We fixed ourselves well under the tarpaulin. The rain came a little harder. Albert had gone to sleep and knocked the covers off . . . when the rain hit his face, he threw his arm out.” Earl checked in with each of the children to see if they were getting rained on, and he deliberated on where they might find shelter, considering an empty boxcar. Earl fixed each child’s blanket over his or her head and ushered them out of the tarpaulin quickly as the rain fell faster.

“If Chester or Red Riggles had seen us that night,” Earl wrote, referencing characters from a comic strip, “they would have run for their lives.”²⁸ The group hurried down the hill through the forest, at night,

28. Chester Gump was a character in cartoonist Sidney Smith’s popular comic strip “The Gumps,” which depicted an ordinary middle-class family. The strip ran in the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1933, Smith wrote comic strips featuring Chester Gump and his encounters with the notorious Red Riggles and his gang of desperadoes. Michigan State University Libraries, Digital Media Collections, Janet A. Ginsburg *Chicago Tribune* Collection, <https://lib.msu.edu/branches/dmc/tribune/>.

in the pouring rain, in search of an available boxcar. Mildred lost her shelter-half. Earl stubbed his big toe. “Down the hill on a trot! To the tracks! To a boxcar! I stuck my flashlight inside. The floor was black from coal. What did that matter! We needed shelter. In I boosted each one. Ah! Let it pour now! We were all right.” They covered the floor with newspaper, followed by their canvasses, then their blankets, “In ten minutes we were snug in bed, shoes on, sweaters on, ready to jump out if the [box]car should be pulled away.” As Dora noted of that night, she “didn’t sleep much and caught a cold.”

Monday, 3 July

Earl and the six children woke up, wet and cold, in the coal dust-covered boxcar. They jumped out carrying their heavy, wet blankets. Earl wrote of the group’s trek back to camp, “We walked along the track, then up the hill through the mud and wet grass to our packs. The cold damp air was depressing. There wasn’t any joy in staying around here any longer in our sticky clothing. We found that our haversacks, stove, and food case had not suffered from the rain.” They hung out their blankets and shelter-halves to dry. Albert and Virgil went to town for two loaves of bread. Breakfast was boiled eggs, canned spaghetti, and rice pops cereal.

“Now it was a question of knowing how to keep the children busy again,” Earl observed. “Tough little youngsters like they were had to have something to do. Virgil and Albert went over a short distance to make a fort. I rolled the blankets with the intention of camping on the other side of town. It would give us a start on our way to Sylvan Lake the next day.” Virgil and Albert came back to show off their wooden fort. Virgil was disappointed that his effort would be unrewarded, as they would be leaving soon, but Earl and the girls offered lavish praise for the fort. Earl heard all four girls “flattering them in genuine American slang.”

The group walked through Custer at ten in the morning and stopped at a tree about half a mile out of town. Earl then returned to town for supplies. He purchased cans of prunes, grapefruit, and peaches along with milk and bread, cutting the loaf “in the usual lucky seven pieces.”

During their time in Custer, a reporter had taken notice of a man with six children walking through town. Page two of the 6 July *Custer County*

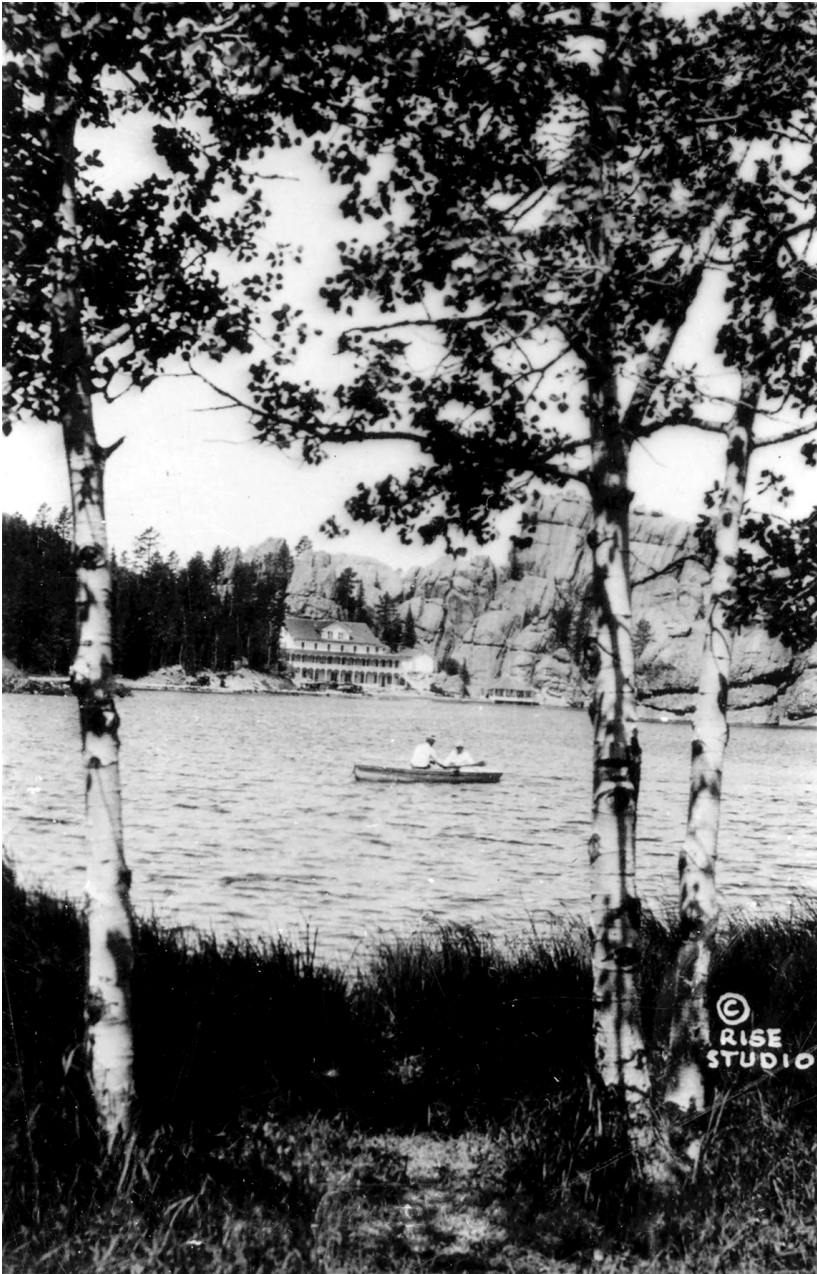
Chronicle included a brief statement acknowledging the Neller-Kincaid group: "Six children, some hardly in their teens, and a man from Missouri, dressed in khaki field uniforms trudged thru town Monday, hiking thru the Hills, and carrying camping equipment."²⁹

After lunch, the children shouted down a passing truck. Earl explained to the driver, "We are hiking through the Black Hills. We have been at Rushmore, Wind Cave, Hot Springs, and lots of other places and want to go to Sylvan Lake." The man in the truck "smiled under his big sombrero" and asked if they were all one family. "No sir," Earl replied, "the three with the light hair are my children; the three with black hair belong to a friend of mine." The man with the big sombrero declared to Earl, "That fellow sure must have had a lot of confidence in you to let you take a bunch of kids like that through this wild country." He responded, "Oh, we are just roughing it. We sleep outside, cook our food, and wash our clothes. I thought that it would be a very valuable experience to them." "Where is your wife?" the man in the sombrero asked. "She is up in North Dakota with the children's grandparents . . . She brought us up as far as Sioux Falls. Then we have hiked and hitch-hiked it from there to Rapid City, down to Hot Springs, and then back here again. We are on our way up to Lead and Deadwood."

"Well, that's the biggest story I ever heard tell of! Hop in the back end," the man exclaimed as he pointed to the truck. As Earl described the incident, "That was real luck. To get a ride and barely wait for it. We climbed in and enjoyed a very scenic view as far as Sylvan Lake. The man drove slowly all the way and seemed to want us to never forget the trip. Then it was uphill too, and we had to climb from 5,301 feet to 6,250 feet altitude."

Carolyn rode in front and the man in the big sombrero, who she referenced in her diary as a "jolly cowboy," asked her, "The only thing I want for giving you a ride is a copy of your diary." Carolyn said she would oblige. Earl observed, "He even seemed to hate to leave us." At Sylvan Lake, Earl and the children climbed a bit up the mountain on the east side of the lake. Earl went to the hotel and found a letter there from his wife Lydia and a second letter from his family in Michigan. Both pieces of correspondence alluded to the fear of sickness:

29. *Custer County Chronicle*, 6 July 1933



Two people paddle a boat on Sylvan Lake in Custer State Park, with the Lake Lodge and cliffs visible in the distance.

Dear Hitch-Hikers:

I am sorry that you have not received any of my letters. I have written, however, to every address you have given me. You should have sent a change of address card to the Post Office. It has been a great surprise to see how fast you are getting along. Grandpa says that he doesn't know how you will ever be able to get through the southern part of North Dakota. It is a most desolate country with no houses or water for miles and miles. What water there is is very bad . . . We hope that no one gets sick. Lots of Love, Mother.

Grandpa Theodore Neller from Michigan wrote, "I hope that the children all stay well. I would enjoy a vacation such as you are taking . . . but I do not think I would like to sleep out-of-doors. Aunt Blanche said that that is just the kind of a trip she would like." Grandpa Neller then quoted "Uncle Bert" as remarking, "Nothing like that for me." He continued, "It is to be hoped that everything turns out all right. I don't know how they would get along, if one of them became sick." After reading the letters, Dora and Carolyn wrote cards to their family members and walked to the hotel to mail them. The travelers then retired early for the next day's hike.

Tuesday, 4 July

Earl woke up each child with an enthusiastic tone, "We are going to Mt. Harney!" He referenced the changes in altitude for their upcoming climb up Black Elk Peak, then known as Harney Peak. "Soon we were off for the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains, 7,240 feet. The altitude of Sylvan Lake is 6,250 feet. That meant that we would have to climb about a thousand feet. It would be quite hard to do, because the air is rare." Earl set a brisk pace, and the explorers took advantage of the cool morning for the four-mile hike. "Around the edge of the lake we hurried, stopped for a minute to wash our faces, then turned up the path that leads to the mountain."³⁰

30. As a later tourist guide described this hike, "It is a beautiful, winding, shaded path, sometimes buried deep in the woods, sometimes skirting the edge of a precipice, with views of distant peaks and of pine-covered slopes . . . the final pitches lead out of the trees to the foot of a ladder in a granite crevice, at the top of which a final short scramble over the rocks leads to the lookout station on the bare granite crag that forms Harney's sum-

“Too many people had already told us that that was one hill we wouldn’t go up so fast,” Earl wrote. “I myself was breathing more rapidly . . . Up, up, up we went.” The children’s pace slowed the further they ascended. Virgil dropped back with Dora and Carolyn, then Elaine asked for a rest. Earl wanted to continue on and remarked that they couldn’t get lost on the trail. Elaine replied, “But I don’t want to rest unless you do.” Earl noted that Mildred led the whole way. After a time, Earl pointed out their destination. “There, see that little house on the top of that peak? That’s where we want to stop.” Earl explained, “When one can see the end of his labor, it seems to give a little added strength.” The trail, however, grew steeper and wound back and forth. Then they came to a sign that read “HITCH PONIES HERE.”

mit.” Federal Writers’ Project, *A South Dakota Guide*, p. 418. See also Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and Badlands*, pp. 105–20; Doane Robinson, *Encyclopedia of South Dakota* (Sioux Falls: Will A. Beach Printing Company, 1925), pp. 74–76.



The children waited for Earl before climbing the “long steep ladder” on the Harney Peak trail. Earl reported that “not one entered an objection or seemed afraid.”

The travel journal continued: "A little higher up I saw the children all waiting on the porch of a small building. Why don't you go on?" Earl asked. "Oh, we're just waiting for you," Mildred replied. "Around back of the building I saw a long steep ladder about as high as a house. . . . Be very careful! This is no place to take care of broken bones." Earl and the children climbed the steep ladder. "Not one entered an objection or seemed afraid," he reported. The journal continued:

Then came a flat rock surface, a little stairs, another part of the bare rock of mountain, a small ladder, and we were standing beside the summer home of one of Uncle Sam's Forest Rangers. We were on the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains, 7240 feet high. Just why we should call an area of mountainous country higher than the Appalachian Mountains the Black Hills is not quite clear. "Paha Sapa," or "the mountains that are black," is what the Indians called the country now known as the Black Hills. Now we could see why they were called "Black." The deep green of the blue spruce and western pine when viewed from a distance shades into a blue-black color. To the Indian these mountains were sacred. The gods who guided his life lived here. Therefore, he fought fiercely to retain possession against the encroaching advance of the white man.

"It was dangerous up there," Earl observed. "Mildred would often get near a precipitous edge that only a slip would have sent her dashing in a thousand pieces below. She seemed to take a fancy to getting as close as possible to some perilous cliff and send a stone crashing down in the valley. The space was too narrow for any of us to walk around much."

It was seven in the morning on the Fourth of July. The forest ranger was shaving as they entered the building. Each wrote their name in the register and received buttons with the words, "Prevent forest fires. Safety First." The forest ranger showed them how to locate fires and lent them his field glasses. Through the glasses, the children gazed at the forested landscape. "We could see Sylvan Lake Hotel very clearly. The Bad Lands lay off to the east."

"What do you do up here?" asked Albert.

"I watch for forest fires," answered the forest ranger.

"What do you do if you see one?" asked Mildred.

"I telephone to the forest fire fighters the exact location and size of the fire."

"Where do you get your water?" asked Dora.

"There is a little spring just a pace down the mountain side."

"Where do you eat?" interjected Virgil.

"My food is brought up to me, and I cook it here."

"I'd hate to be the one who brought up your food," said Carolyn. "I was carrying only a loaf of bread; and, believe me, the next time I'm going to throw it over a cliff!"

"A loaf of bread isn't heavy," stated the forest ranger.

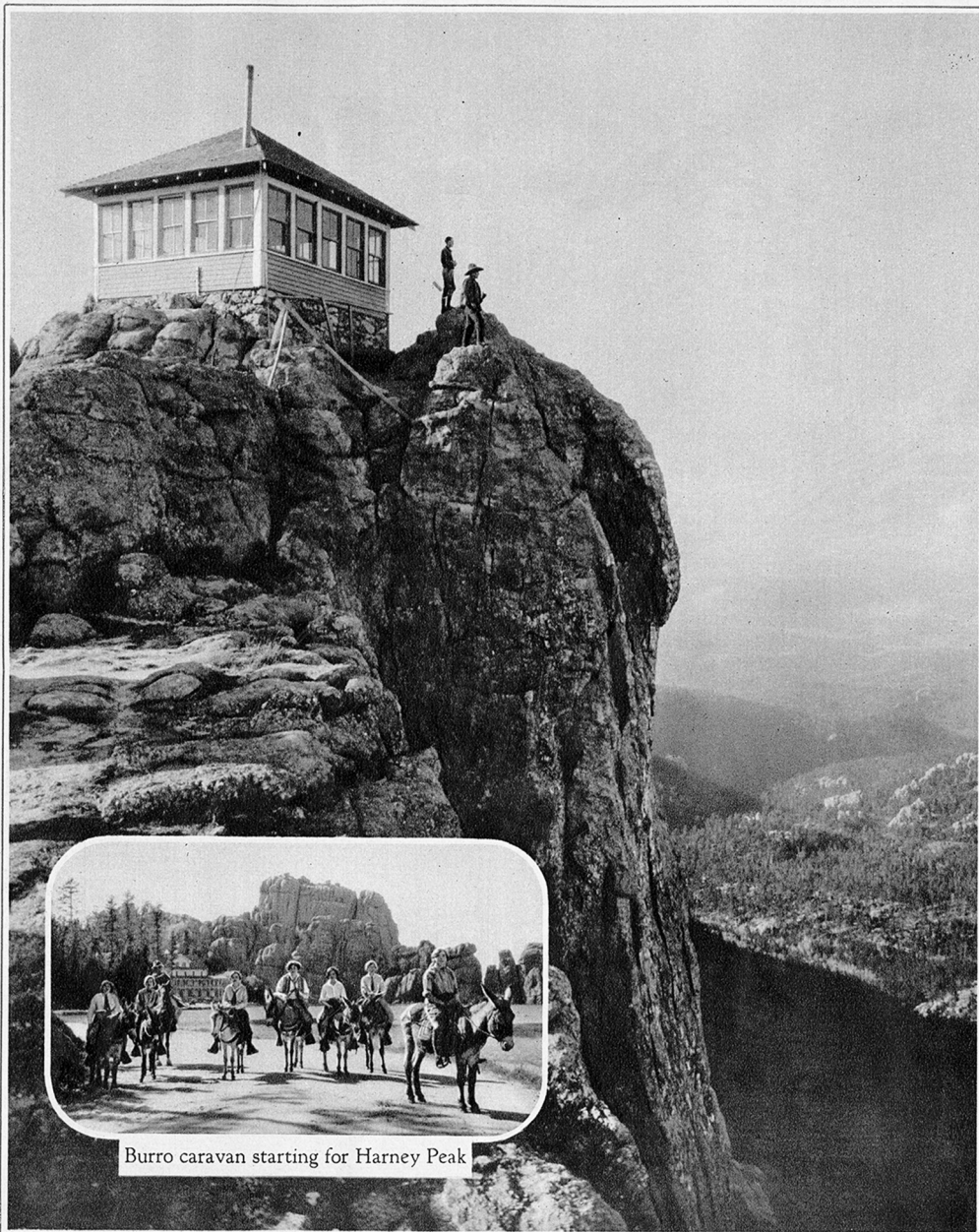
"It surely was more than I wanted to carry," replied Carolyn.

The group then walked together to the second landing, about thirty feet below, and ate bread and kidney beans. After eating "we descended the long ladder and cut our way across the loops. At each step our heels slipped one, two, or three inches on the dry ground or hard rock. My toes were a bit sore when I got to the bottom. Everyone went as fast down as he chose . . . I was the last to arrive," Earl wrote. Back at Sylvan Lake, they washed their feet and socks. Dora and Carolyn played cards. Virgil and Albert swam in the lake. Earl slept.

They ate again at one o'clock, once again dividing the loaf of bread into seven parts, "undoubtedly the lucky seven, because we were getting along so well . . . We cut up an onion too. It would seem funny to eat that way at home. Here it was good. As one of the children remarked once, 'There was nothing else to eat. We had to eat something.'"

The children went back down to Sylvan Lake where they saw people fishing and others celebrating the holiday with fireworks. "I told the children that we could not spend any money in that way this year. They were all very wise little folks, because they did not tease at all." Earl wrote in his journal before falling asleep. Later in the afternoon he went to the store and bought potatoes and butter for supper. Mildred and Elaine went to bed early at the campsite. The rest of the children went down to the lake and watched a man catch fish. "He surely knew his business. For he caught eleven of them while other fishermen caught only one or two or none at all," Earl observed. At nightfall, Dora, Carolyn, Earl, Albert, and Virgil returned to camp and soon fell asleep.

THE BLACK HILLS OF SOUTH DAKOTA



Burro caravan starting for Harney Peak

Used by courtesy Publishers Photo Service

This tourist guide depicts two Forest Rangers standing near the lookout tower atop Black Elk Peak, then known as Harney Peak. At 7,240 feet, the peak is the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains and proved to be a tough hike for the group.

Wednesday, 5 July

The group took a morning excursion on the Needles Highway.³¹ “Everyone we met had told us that we must see the Needles Highway,” Earl explained. The group put on their sweaters, washed their hands and faces, and started out at a brisk pace to get warm. Of the Needles Eye Tunnel, Earl recollected:

Winding through towering granite walls, carved by nature into spires and peaks of wonderful beauty we steadily climbed upward. Back and forth we went, so much so that these places have been named “the Switchbacks.” Surely the state of South Dakota did well to hew these roads through the rocks of granite. Cathedral spires are everywhere and reach an altitude of over 6,000 feet. It is known as one of the most beau-

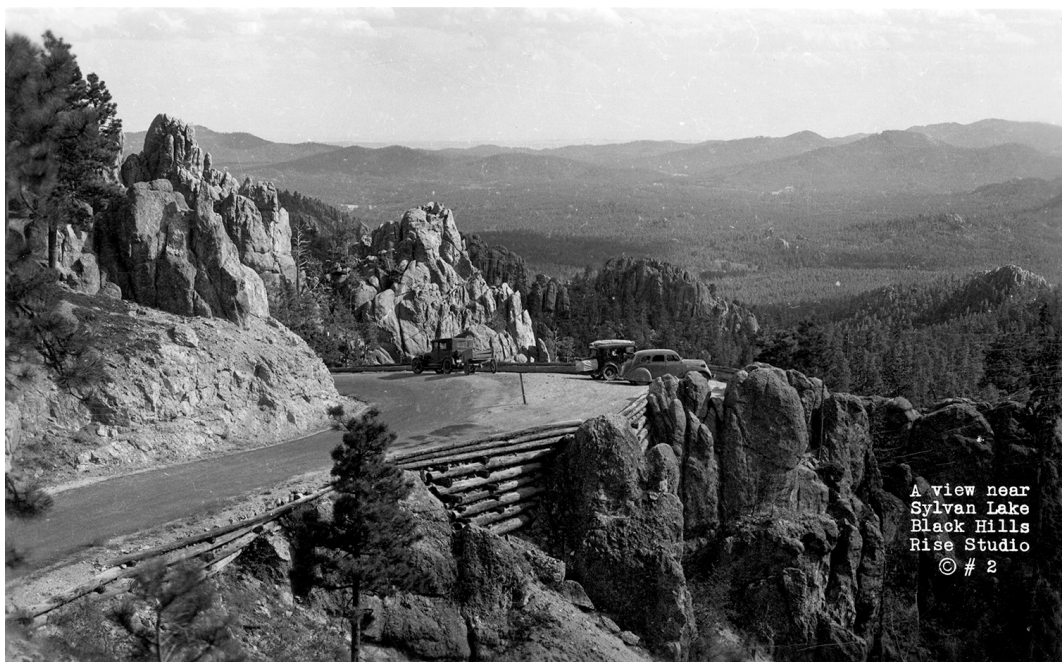
31. For more on the Needles Highway, see Federal Writers’ Project, *A South Dakota Guide*, pp. 417–20; Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 49–52; Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and Badlands*, pp. 100–103.



This photograph shows a bird’s eye view of the dramatic granite spires, pine and spruce forests, and serpentine switchbacks of the Needles Highway. Locals insisted that Neller and the kids see this fourteen-mile route through the Black Hills.

tiful ten-mile drives in the West. Some of it was built at a cost of \$70,000 a mile. We saw the pinnacles, the spires, the needles, the traffic cop, and the others that are so familiar on postcards.

Earl, under the impression that a store was among the Needles, neglected to bring food. When they were unable to find a store, the group decided to return to Sylvan Lake. The round trip took three hours. Back at the lake, they feasted on oatmeal with brown sugar, boiled eggs, and bread. They found a suitable stream along the Needles in which to bathe and wash their clothes. Earl warned the children, "The one who gets his good breeches soiled will have to go without sugar in the morning." He reasoned, "This was enough to make each one careful." It was a day for washing clothes and general relaxation. They ate a full lunch, played cards, sewed clothes, studied French, and took naps.



On 5 July, the day after climbing Harney Peak, Earl and the children took a three-hour sojourn on the Needles Highway near Sylvan Lake, a portion of which can be seen in this 1940 photograph credited to Rise Studio in Rapid City.

After supper, some of the children checked for mail at the Sylvan Lake Hotel. "In a short time they came back breathless running up the hill."

"We have a little baby brother," sang out Mildred to Dora and Albert, "and his name is Arthur Ellis!"³²

"A baby boy!" they all exclaimed.

"Albert looked up to see whether she meant it," Earl observed.

"When did we get him?" asked Dora.

"I don't know. He must be three or four weeks old by now," said Carolyn.

"Daddy wrote us lots of letters and we didn't get any of them," complained Mildred.

"What are you going to do with another brother?" Earl asked the Kincaid children.

"Oh, we can play with him," said Mildred. "Let's go home now. I don't want to hike anymore."

"That's so funny," interjected Elaine. "To think that you have had it all this time and we didn't know anything about it!"

"Albert can give it to me, if he doesn't want it," Virgil said.

"Oh, I'll want it all right," retorted Albert.

"Thus the conversation went on for about an hour," Earl recalled. "Albert seemed the most surprised because he wasn't the baby of the family anymore." Albert and Virgil went down to Sylvan Lake once the excitement faded. The other children stayed at camp and filled their diaries. Carolyn and Dora studied French.

Earl heard shouting and splashing down by the lake. He hurried to investigate. "Some men along the bank had evidently encouraged [Albert and Virgil] into a water battle." Earl scolded the boys. "What's the matter with you boys, anyway? You just washed your clothes today, and now you splash them all up . . . You boys are big enough to be depended upon when I trust you that way. If you can't behave, then I can never let you go out alone together."

32. Arthur Ellis Kincaid was born 24 June 1933 to Charles Kincaid and Antonia (Levick) Kincaid. *Birth Index, 1920-1999*, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, www.missouribirthindex.com.

Thursday, 6 July

After the excitement of the previous two mornings, Earl “felt that [the kids] were entitled to a little longer sleep.” He built a small campfire on the morning of 6 July and sent Virgil and Albert to fill the canteens. The children rolled their blankets and had corn mush for breakfast. “When we had eaten and washed our mess kits, we were ready to begin our journey to Hill City . . . The road ascended for more than a mile. The sweat began to roll off from our backs even though it was early. I said to the children: ‘Next time you will wish that I had gotten you up early and marched before breakfast. This heat is terrible.’”

The travel journal mentions an increase in onlookers. “About ten o’clock the sky became overcast and made walking cooler. It was at this time that a man stopped his car to take our picture. In fact we must have been a sight, for everyone gazed at us, laughed as they went by, and probably counted us too.” The cooling breeze alerted them to impending rain. “Lightning flashed across the sky ahead of us . . . We did not figure on any rain; it had been too pleasant in the morning. What we would do if a rain held us up for four or five hours, we did not think about. Suddenly, the sky became very black. The wind grew colder, so much so that goose-flesh stood out on our arms.”

They found a deserted gas station that would offer protection from the rain. Next to the station was a sign that read, “FOUR MILE HILL! FILL UP WITH GAS!” They hoped the storm would go around them. “We ventured on to Mt. Harney Camp. The lady showed us a great many things that she had made out of stones such as we saw at Artcrafter’s Studio in Custer.” They ventured on, as the clouds hid the mountain peaks.

Virgil asked, “If we were on Mt. Harney now, would we be above the clouds?” “Yes, son,” Earl responded, “you could look down on the clouds. You might even be standing in the sunshine, and it would look as if there was a fog below you.”

They walked by a shelter, but the rain stayed away. “Sometimes it looked as if it would rain, then it wouldn’t. We marched on. At one time a few big raindrops did fall and we scurried for shelter under an old pile of poles.” Rain finally arrived when they were two and a half miles from Hill City:

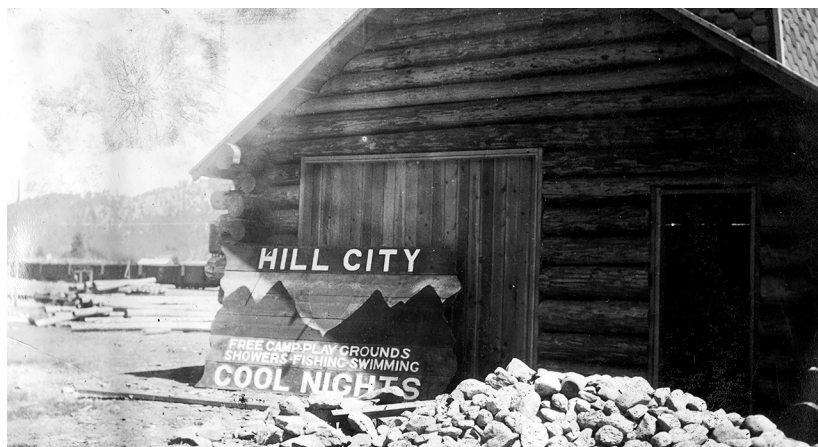
A fine mist began to fall. If we had known just how far the next farmhouse had been, we might have hurried. Since that could not be, we stood under some large pine trees. The rain came down still harder. I unrolled Elaine's blanket roll and showed the rest how to throw the middle over a branch in order to form a little tent. Virgil, Elaine, and I got under it and held the corners down. The others were supposed to have done the same thing. After a hard shower, I discovered that all four of them had tried to get under one tarpaulin. That didn't work very well and Dora had her back good and wet. We rerolled the wet shelter-halves and started on our way.

"What a sorry sight we must have made splashing through the mud! We were all damp, sticky, and depressed," Earl recalled. Once the rain stopped, the group set a quicker pace. Carrying the stove, food case, blanket, and haversack strained Earl's shoulders. Albert lagged behind, while Dora and Carolyn helped carry his load. Albert began to cough. "It hurts me right through the chest. Now it begins to feel some better, since that weight is off." Near town a truck offered a ride. "Get in," the driver said. "I'm only going a half mile. But you look pretty wet, and you may be glad to ride." They had walked almost eight and a half miles, not having worn their packs for three days. "The journey was a little too much for us," Earl noted.

Hill City was a welcome stop after hiking through the rain. "We soon found a good place at a Free Camp right in the heart of town. It also had free shelter, three stoves, and a wood pile. Food was reasonable here too. It was in fact the most family like town we had yet come across, unless Montrose might have been an exception." They bought more groceries and ate warm oatmeal for supper. "Albert lay down on the bench, then went to bed early and coughed some. . . . It was a very deep cough."

Friday, 7 July

Earl described the camp building at Hill City as "about twice the size of an ordinary living room and two times as long as it is wide. A chimney is in the middle and three stoves are on three sides. A stationary table is at either end, and a movable table on the side where there is no stove. Around the side of the building, boards extend up about four feet. The remaining distance up to the roof is open except for the posts used as

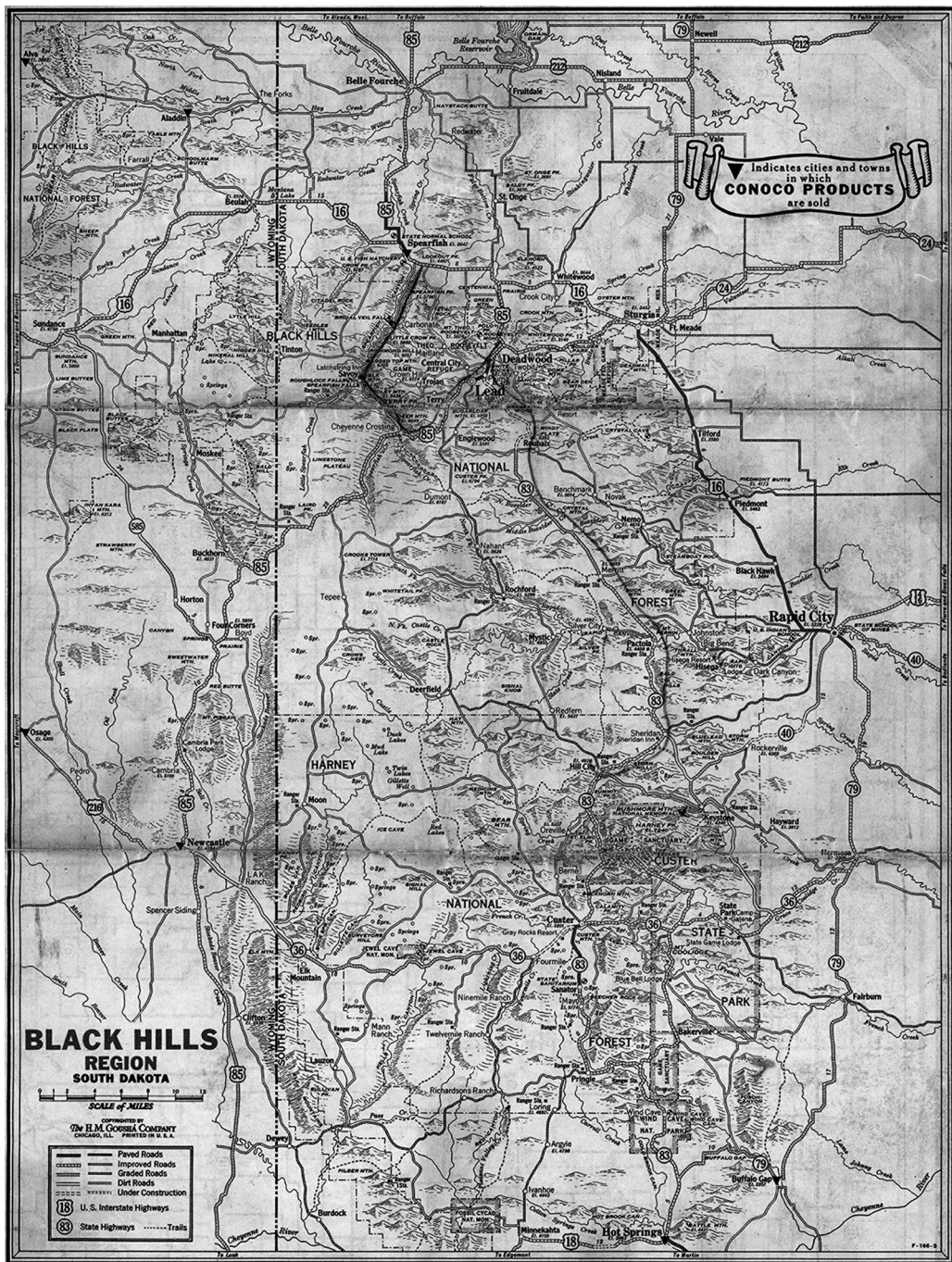


This free campground at Hill City, constructed by the National Youth Administration in the 1930s, touted the facility's playground, showers, fishing, and swimming.

supports. Two gates, one in the middle on either side, form the entrances." In addition, "The level concrete floor formed a nice smooth surface in contrast to the hillsides that we had been used to."

The group used that Friday in Hill City to recuperate. After sleeping in, Earl used the camp stove to heat water and swept the floor with an old broom. Their breakfast was corn mush and bread. The children whittled sticks all morning. "This was not vigorous exercise for them and there was soon a tendency to want to run around and shout. No matter how hard I worked them, they would get over their fatigue quickly." According to the travel journal, the group wanted to get to Lead to see the Kincaids' uncle.

They packed their items and waited by the road for a ride. "Our feet were not in shape to do any hiking . . . We would have liked to have gone on two or three miles; but the distance to Rapid City or Lead was so great that it would have been difficult to undertake either journey without carrying an enormous food supply." Earl estimated that the children carried four to five pounds of rocks and stones gathered on the trip. "So if we were to make any very strenuous journey, it had to be done when our feet and shoulders did not hurt." Earl and the children waited by the road until half past six that evening. Not finding a ride, they returned to the free campground.



This map depicts the road network of the Black Hills. Few of the roads and trails were paved in the 1930s, making for good rock collecting but hard hiking.

Dora, Elaine, and Mildred provided somewhat similar interpretations of the day. Whittling arrows was the highlight. All three mentioned waiting for a ride, but eventually ending up back at the campground. Dora studied her French. Elaine referenced writing in her diary and that she and Mildred went to a school and teetered on a seesaw because there were boys on the swings. Mildred noted, "Virgil, Albert, and I made rocket ships . . . We made a hangar out of fruit boxes. . . . A boy on a horse came by and stayed until we had supper."

Saturday, 8 July

Elaine woke up several times during the night feeling weak with a sore stomach. She believed that teetering at the school made her sick. In addition to a stomachache, she had a fever and was pale and sweaty. Albert coughed more and deeper than before; as Earl described it, "His voice was husky, and he seemed to have difficulty in breathing." Referencing the fear of sickness that many family members had expressed, Earl wrote, "I began to feel that what some of the folks had said at home was true. They had cautioned me about the danger of sleeping out-of-doors, when we weren't used to it. But by this time, we should have become accustomed to it." While the group couldn't hike that day, they hoped to find a ride. "Hebron was a long way away yet," Earl commented, "and our big problem was to get over that long strip of desolate country north of the Black Hills and east of the North Dakota Bad Lands. One jump was about seventy-five miles as near as we could figure out from our maps."

The group—except for Elaine, who lay on a campground table—had breakfast. She agreed to walk to the main road if the others carried her things. Earl continued, "We parked ourselves in the front of an old, dilapidated building in which every window was broken and the plaster off in most places. Nevertheless, this building was being used as a gospel church." It was eleven in the morning, and they hadn't gotten a lift. Earl bought groceries and they ate again. Two hours later, they still had no ride. There were no trucks and very few cars. Earl "was tired of waiting. You can imagine then what it meant to the children." He bought a newspaper and the children read the funnies. By two in the afternoon, Elaine felt better but still no ride. "At 3:00 o'clock it was decided that we had better return to the Free Camp Shelter. We were tired of doing

nothing. We wanted some excitement. We were depressed.”

Earl decided to mail the children’s collection of rocks and stones. “If that weight was replaced by food, we could walk on. It seemed rather cruel to make them give them up.” Earl walked to a nearby garage and asked if he could borrow a hammer to make a box, promising to return it within an hour. A man at the garage said yes, and before long Earl constructed “a box made out of old orange crates.” Then, “Carolyn and Dora took the stones over to see what the price would be. 73 cents. Not so bad! But the box was only half full. I cut it down to the proper size, put in our camel water bottles that we had made no use of, nailed it solid with long slim box nails from the hardware store, and soon had a very neat little box. It weighed about thirty pounds and went away for sixty-five cents.”

With the rocks mailed home, the troop had more room for food. “We bought five large cans of Del Monte brand at twenty-five cents a can. What a price! I think they would have been fifty cents a can at Sylvan Lake. But we had to have them. Two more loaves of bread, two dozen of eggs, seven oranges, seven bananas, etc.” Earl built a fire at the free campground and the group ate a “heavy meal” of boiled eggs, kidney beans, spaghetti, and bread.

A debate ensued about riding the train to Lead. Carolyn and Dora objected, but it became a moot point, as there was no local train service until Monday. “But we were too anxious to be moving. We would walk. When would we start? In the morning? No, right away!” They agreed to walk to Lead, over forty miles away. Earl felt sorry for Elaine who still looked pale and weak. He got her ready first and asked her to walk ahead to a white bridge that crossed the railroad while the others prepared to leave. Earl calculated that two miles that night and six miles in the morning would put them near Sheridan Lake, which they were told had a store. Earl heard Elaine shouting, “Come on! Come on! We have a ride.” She flagged down a CCC truck bound for Rapid City.

Down the railroad tracks we double timed. I tried to run. But how could one run with fifty pounds, a stove in one hand, a food case in the other, and a pack on my back! Everyone was loaded to his capacity...As we reached the bridge where the truck was waiting for us, we had to go up a bank of about twenty feet. It was steep, and I almost fell backwards.

When Dora tried, she let loose of the cooking pail. That was caught, but the cover came off and the little pail inside came out and rolled nearly down to the bottom. How we scrambled up that embankment! Each one was breathless. Our throat felt the exertion that comes from such a strenuous effort.

The man driving the CCC truck saw Elaine alone and stopped, wondering where she was going. She replied, "To Sheridan! Perhaps to Lead! Maybe to Rapid City!" He agreed to take all seven of the travelers. Earl noted, "Elaine was happy and told how she got the ride. It would almost make the sick well to catch such a 'lift' all the way to Rapid City. Then, to think we would have missed it by just a few seconds. Little experiences like this have already taught the children some valuable lessons. Minutes are precious sometimes, and it pays to not be too slow."

The CCC driver let them off at the post office in Rapid City, exactly where they were two weeks prior. A woman who remembered seeing the group previously pulled up to the post office curb and asked where they were bound next. Earl answered, "We are going to Crystal Cave, and then to Lead, finally to North Dakota." He informed her of their hike to Mount Rushmore, Hot Springs, Wind Cave, Jewel Cave, Custer, Sylvan Lake, and Hill City. They also discussed the rainstorm that Earl and the children walked through before entering Hill City, which the woman noted had brought hail to certain parts of the Black Hills. She wished them good luck and left. "She had stopped purposely to inquire about us," Earl observed. "Many others were curious and watched us. What a difference there are in places and people! Some make one feel like a hero; others are cold and keep one entirely outside of that feeling of welcome."

The children continued to walk through Rapid City, to the point where Earl couldn't catch up to them or see them as it got darker. With exertion, he reached them and was very angry. "What are you people hiking so fast for?" Elaine explained, "A man was walking with us and asking all about us and we just kept on walking." "If there was just one person to blame," Earl responded indignantly, "I would punish you. Now it is nearly pitch dark and hard to find a place to sleep. When some of you get behind, you don't like it. But when someone else is behind, you forget about it."

They soon approached a tourist camp. Dora suggested they sleep there, but when Earl asked the owner if he and the children could camp on the grounds he answered, “Can’t do it sir.” Earl seemed to understand, to a point, “Of course, that was his way of earning a living. But he was the type of a man interested only in himself and what brought in money. We walked by him, crossed the road, and camped in a grove directly opposite his grounds.”³³

Sunday, 9 July

Earl and the children slept in on Sunday morning among a grove of cottonwood trees, just north of the tourist camp and east of a greenhouse with several windows broken out from a recent hailstorm. Further east was the Baken Park Pavilion, “from which floated jazz music far into

33. According to Jakle, free campgrounds “had all but disappeared by 1930. . . . Camping fees invited private businessmen to enter the campground field, bringing to an end in most towns’ government involvement in the camping business.” Jakle, *The Tourist*, p. 160; Polk’s directory of Rapid City (1932–1933), provides a list of eighteen “Tourists’ Camps” in Rapid City with an additional six tourist camps in Hill City, Keystone, Rockerville, and Wasta. Polk’s *Rapid City Directory* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: R. L. Polk Directory Co., 1932–1933), pp. 311–12.



While in Rapid City, the Neller-Kincaid group climbed up to see the large white letter promoting the South Dakota School of Mines on “M” Hill.

the night.” Both Elaine and Albert’s health seemed better. The night before, Earl went to a dime store and purchased what he thought were sugared dates: “Seven of them were given to each child . . . Low and behold! They were candy. That was a joke on me.”

Albert, Virgil and Earl climbed up a mountain across the creek to see the big “M” of the South Dakota State School of Mines. “The ‘M’ was not quite finished. It seems that each graduating class does a section of it. The part to be finished yet is made merely out of white-washed stones. This ‘M’ is of interest because it can be seen from any part of the city and for miles beyond. The width is 66 feet and the height 112 feet.”³⁴

Earl also left an entry in his travel journal copied from a Rapid City Chamber of Commerce brochure that touted the city as “the Gateway of the Hills,” and “the largest trade center of the Black Hills.” “As Rome was built on seven hills,” the description concluded, “so Rapid City claims the distinction of being built at the apex of seven valleys, whose splendid scenery is diversified with fertile farm and grazing lands.”³⁵

They returned to camp and Earl washed clothes while the children played in the nearby creek. They ate an early supper at half past four because the children, “wanted to see the big Indian War Dance that is held every evening in front of the Duhamel Cowboy and Indian Trading Post opposite the Alex Johnson Hotel according to the circulars.” Dora took charge of the Neller children, Carolyn the Kincaids. “At 8:30 o’clock they returned without having seen the dance. Someone told them that it did not take place on Sunday. They had waited all day to see it. So they were disappointed.”³⁶

34. The first School of Mines “M” was constructed on Cowboy Hill in October 1912, when seventy-five students and teachers along with two teams of horses excavated an “M” and filled it with whitewashed rock. Ruth Anne Stymiest, *Centennial: An Illustrated History, 1885–1985* (Rapid City: South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, 1985), p. 36.

35. The above paragraph is also found in “Black Hills of South Dakota” (Rapid City: Rapid City Chamber of Commerce, 1932), p. 8. The Neller-Kincaid group stopped at many of the Black Hills attractions found in the Rapid City Chamber of Commerce brochure.

36. Lakota medicine man Black Elk and Rapid City businessman Alex Duhamel organized a public American Indian dance pageant with traditional Lakota ceremonies in 1927. The pageant was originally held in front of the Duhamel general store in Rapid City. By 1934, the pageant had moved to the Sitting Bull Crystal Cavern. Dale Lewis, *Duhamel from Ox Cart . . . to Television* (Chamberlain, S.Dak.: Register-Lakota Printing, 1993), pp. 117–38; Eric Steven Zimmer, “Historical and Cultural Significance Report: Sitting Bull Crystal Caverns and Surrounding Property,” Feb. 2016 (Rapid City: Vantage Point Historical Services); Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 146–49.



B. P. Ray

SEE THE BIG WAR DANCE

Sioux, Crow and Cheyenne Indian war dances are held each evening at 7:30 on the streets in front of the Cowboy and Indian Trading Post, Rapid City. See the Indians at work weaving blankets, making moccasins and other Indian handiwork.

The children were sorely disappointed they did not get to see the Crow, Cheyenne, and Sioux Indian “war dances” in Rapid City, South Dakota. This extract from a Rapid City Chamber of Commerce brochure portrays tribal members in ceremonial regalia.

Monday, 10 July

The group woke early and started the twenty-two-mile hike to Crystal Cave. After taking their fourth stop of the trip, the girls hailed a passing truck, which took them sixteen miles. “Gee! What a ‘lift!’ Forty miles an hour wasn’t a speed to be winked at so early in the morning,” Earl reported. They were let off at a road leading to Crystal Cave and Wonderland Cave.

“There evidently was some competition for tourists,” Earl observed. “For there were men to represent both caves. The Crystal Cave owners were having a new building put up. The building of the Wonderland Cave men stood about two hundred feet beyond.” Earl and the children met “a very old man with a very bad limp” who was in charge of Crystal Cave.

After the old man asked them the standard questions, they ate breakfast and asked if he would watch their packs. He agreed, adding, “Well,

it doesn't matter how long it takes you. I will take good care of your packs. You can sleep around here anywhere tonight, if you want to; and if it rains we will fix up something so that you don't get wet." With their packs and belongings secured, they hiked five and a half miles to Crystal Cave. "The man at the Wonderland Cave fork tried to get us to go to his [cave] first," Earl recorded, "but the other man was guarding our packs, and we felt under obligations to him somewhat."

After some effort on the hot, dusty, inclined road, the group reached Crystal Cave.³⁷ Earl's travel journal again offered a description that appears to be cribbed from a promotional brochure:

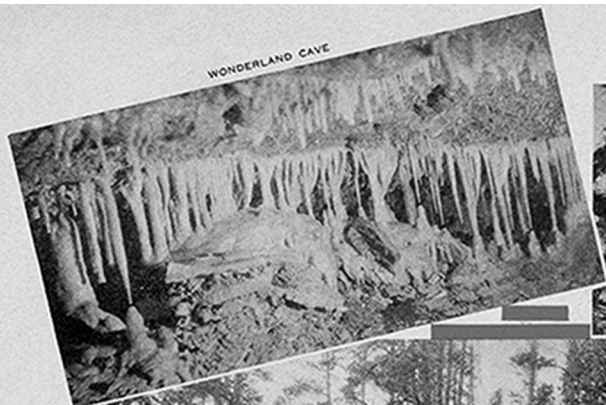
The original entrance to Crystal Cave is about three hundred feet above Elk Creek on Elk Creek Canyon. About fifty years ago, in exploring the Black Hills, two hunters one day wounded a mountain lion, which disappeared into an opening in the face of the cliff. The men followed and found they had entered a high ceiled room; continuing on they discovered other rooms, the walls and ceilings of which were covered with prism shaped crystals, so clear as to reflect rainbow colors in the light of their pine torches. From this beginning, exploration of Crystal Cave has continued through the years, till now there are many miles of paths and about 1500 rooms explored. Every conceivable formation of Crystal beauty, myriad lakes, and pools of limpid water, clear and cool, and gleaming projections of calcite crystal show the work of ages as the cave was made. . . . It was from this cave that the crystal was taken that was used in the miniature Crystal Cave at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893.

They exited Crystal Cave at one o'clock in the afternoon and marched back down the road. The children were immediately hungry, but they had brought nothing to eat. After finding "a refreshing spring that came out of the rock in pailfuls," the group stopped at the "Mountain Inn" and purchased ten buns and two small cans of beans. They later refilled their canteens at a farmhouse: "It was fortunate that there was plenty of water for nothing."

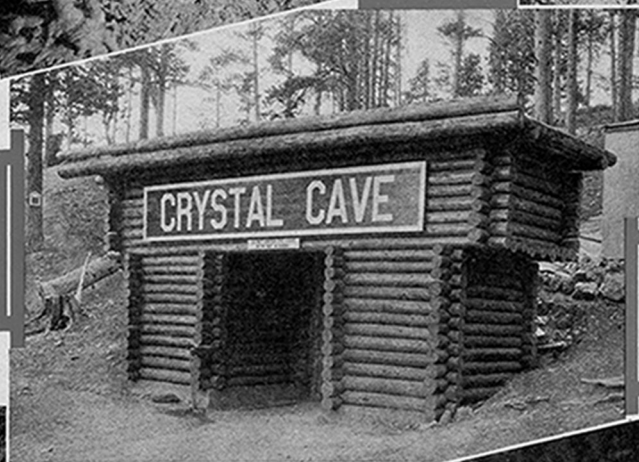
Earl and the children arrived at the fork leading to Wonderland Cave, but it was too far for a second hike. "A new, well-built, graded road has just been completed that takes one directly past the entrance and con-

37. Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and Badlands*, pp. 43-47; Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*, pp. 36, 141.

WONDERLAND CAVE



NAMELESS CAVE



PETRIFIED FOREST



INDIAN PAGEANT AT SITTING BULL CAVERN

*Wonderland Cave—Between Rapid City and Sturgis
Crystal Cave—Between Rapid City and Sturgis
Petrified Forest—Between Rapid City and Sturgis*

*Nameless Cave—Six miles up Rapid Creek from Rapid City
Sitting Bull—On Highway 16 between Rapid City and Rushmore*



Eerie, Underland Beauty

This travel advertisement highlights Crystal Cave, Wonderland Cave, the Petrified Forest, Nameless Cave, and the Indian Pageant at Sitting Bull Cavern, all attractions in the northern Black Hills.

nects with the highway that leads up to Lead and Deadwood. This cave was first opened to the public in 1931, is of rare beauty, and is bidding high for the tourists that would go to Crystal Cave." The tired group waited half an hour for a ride. "No one came to the great disappointment of the salesman. But to have gone there on foot would have meant a hike of seventeen miles that day . . . in a short time we arrived at our packs."

By four in the afternoon, everyone was "as hungry as bears." Their meal consisted of pears, peas, and bread. Blisters formed on everyone's feet. Earl calculated they walked over a mile with their packs on and more than twelve without. They had another conversation with the old man with a limp. "How did you enjoy the cave?" he asked. Mildred said, "It was swell." Carolyn replied, "Oh, it was all right." Virgil injected, "I liked Wind Cave better." The old man concluded, "It is too bad that you cannot see them both, and then you could judge for yourself. They are both wonderful caves."

A logging truck provided a ride to Sturgis. In Dora's account of the day, she noted that they saw Bear Butte, which sits just northeast of town, on the way. The driver dropped them off in the middle of town. It was nearly dark, "but there were plenty of people to gaze at us. Soon we reached a spring and a filling station. Near the spring was a good place to sleep." They camped next to the Trisco Flour Company building. The group startled the flour company's night watchman who questioned them in a deep voice, "What are you people doing here?" among other questions. Satisfied that Earl and the six children were not there to make trouble, he suggested they "come in and see us make flour." Earl remarked that it was a treat for the children to see the flour making operations.

Tuesday, 11 July

After rising with the sun, Earl and the children walked to a viaduct over the main highway for shade. The children decided the night before to have shredded wheat for breakfast. They also purchased milk from a dairy truck. Around eight o'clock that morning, "a cowboy with a lariat stopped to talk with us." Earl informed the cowboy of their travel of the past three weeks, to which he replied, "Then it is no need to tell you what wild life means." They informed him of their intention to go

to Deadwood “to see the graves of Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, and Preacher Smith that everyone in this part of the country speaks about.”

The children asked the cowboy, who rode a sorrel horse with a white face, questions about his lariat, whether there were wild horses in the Black Hills, and if so, had he ever caught any. Virgil asked him if he could ride his horse. “No, this horse would buck us off,” the cowboy replied. “He’s a good-natured animal, but he is a little particular about the number that he has on his back.” He did, however, have a dark bay horse with him that the children would be safe to ride.

The cowboy returned with the tamer horse and also with his young son, who was standing on the horse and holding on to his father’s shoulders, laughing and giggling as they rode by. “Doesn’t that look cute!” exclaimed Dora. Carolyn said, “You’ll be a great rodeo rider like your daddy someday, won’t you little boy?” Both Albert and Virgil took a ride. It was soon time for the father and son to leave, but before going the cowboy told Virgil he would “bring a carload of horses down to St. Louis next winter and throw you in a yearling for nothing.” “Gee! That will be fine!” replied Virgil. “Do you really mean it?”

At Sturgis, an earlier threat of punishment came to fruition after Virgil and Mildred sat on the case the group used to carry groceries, “smashing the oatmeal box, spilling the contents over everything else,” marking the second time that had happened. According to Earl, “After both had received a little punishment, I said: ‘Now, I can’t tell exactly who is to blame. If I have punished either of you unfairly, then I am sorry. But it will make up for some of the times that you should have been punished. This is the second time that the case has been sat on and I know of no other way to stop it.’” “The children accepted the punishment like sensible children should,” Earl noted “and in a few minutes one could not tell that there had been a ripple on the water.”

After eating what Albert described as “one gallon of prunes” at noon, some of the children watched for an approaching truck while the others found shade near the Sturgis stockyards. At two in the afternoon, they hitched a ride through Boulder Canyon and into Deadwood. They thanked the driver and camped near a creek that was “so black itself from the mining activities that it was of no benefit to us.” Later that afternoon Earl and the children hiked to Mount Moriah Cemetery: “Up, up, up the mountain side we went. Never before did I hear of a ceme-



The graves of Wild West legends “Wild Bill” Hickock and “Calamity Jane” Burke, located at Mount Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood, can be seen in this undated photograph. Methodist minister “Preacher” Smith and lawman Seth Bullock are also buried at Mount Moriah.

tery being placed on a mountain like that. Up 150 to 200 steps and other grades too! We met a jovial cowboy and with him we saw the graves of Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane and Preacher Smith.” They also visited the Adams Museum, “where is found a marvelous collection of articles connected with the early history of the Black Hills. One could enjoy a whole day in such a place.” They went back to camp, ate supper, washed up, walked down the railroad tracks, crossed the main highway, and went past the city streetlights to the outskirts of Deadwood.

Earl had help finding a suitable spot to spend the night: “All was black as night. A big bluff was on one side of the road and the roar of a creek could be heard on the other side . . . I went back about 200 feet, crossed a bridge, and soon found what appeared to be [a] satisfactory [campsite]. On my way back I stopped at a Conoco Station and inquired about the lay of the land over across the creek. He told me that he had a better place, and forthwith lighted his lantern, and guided me to the place that he had spoken of.” It was half past ten by this time, and the group soon fell asleep.

Wednesday, 12 July

“Everybody up! Quick! It’s raining! Put on your shoes right away!’ You should have seen us jump up and scramble for our things.” Initially, Earl observed no signs of rain, waking up to a slightly overcast sky before going back to bed. “Suddenly, big raindrops fell on my face. I called the children quickly, slipped on my shoes without lacing them, and rolled one pack. The rain began to fall too fast. So I threw the blankets over the luggage and the shelter-halves over the blankets, and waited for the rain to stop. It subsided as quickly as it started.” They dried off, packed up, and headed to Lead. The journal provided another travel-brochure description of the town and the Homestake Mine, which featured facts such as, “Lead is known as the ‘Mile High City,’ because it is one mile above sea level. The Homestake Mining Company, the largest producer of gold in the United States, is located here also. The number of employees is about 1800 and the annual payroll \$3,000,000.”

“It was three miles to Lead, up hill all the way, and the last mile a mule killer,” Earl reported. The group marched, rested, and marched on again, until they saw a sign “in big letters above the road” that read “ONE HALF MILE TO HOMESTAKE MINE.” After reaching the Homestead Mine, the group took a tour at a cost of one dollar. “We saw how the ore was pulverized and washed. We saw the foundries, the machine shop, and the elevator room. It was a wonderful trip and took one hour and a half.”³⁸ Earl later observed that the mine operated around the clock: “One time during the night, I got up to look at the lights of the mine buildings. They did present a pretty picture in the black night. The constant noise could be heard too; for they run twenty-four hours in the day.”

After the mine tour, Earl called the Homestake Hospital to find the Kincaid children’s uncle, who worked as a doctor there.³⁹ The uncle re-

38. Purl Peterson and his traveling party took a similar tour through the Homestake Mine in 1929. Peterson, *Through the Black Hills and Badlands*, pp. 71–80. For more on the mine, see William Bronson and T. H. Watkins, *Homestake the Centennial History of America’s Greatest Gold Mine* (San Francisco: Homestake Mining Company, 1977); Mildred Fielder, *The Treasure of Homestake Gold* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: North Plains Press, 1970); Steven Mitchell, *Nuggets to Neutrinos: The Homestake Story* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2009).

39. Research into “Dora’s uncle” was inconclusive. Employee records reveal a potential match in a Dr. John Walter Hardy Jr., who was hired by Homestake in 1929. Hardy lived his early life in Missouri and married Marian E. Miles. The couple had a son born in Lead in



Neller and the children toured the Homestake Mine in Lead, pictured here around the time of their visit. The Kincaid children's uncle worked as a doctor at the company's onsite hospital.

ceived Earl “most cordially and said he would be at the station to get me almost right away.” Earl then made a quick trip to the post office and found a letter from his wife Lydia. It started to rain just as the doctor arrived in his car. “For once I think he realized what a load was,” Earl said. The doctor took Earl and the children to his home and the group was welcomed by the doctor's wife. The older girls took a bath. “What a treat it was to get a real meal! It took until nearly 3:30 to polish all the shoes, bathe, and change our clothes.” Dora and Mildred spent the night at their uncle's home, while the rest of the group stayed in two beds at the “Mile High Pay Camp.”

December 1930 named John. Hardy died in an auto accident in Missouri in 1936. Genealogical research provided no concrete connection between either Hardy or his wife Marian to Charles Kincaid, his first wife Clarice Neal (mother to the three Kincaid children), or Charles's second wife Antonia Levick. Hiring Register, 1927–1944, Homestake Employee Collection (2005.001), Deadwood History, Inc., Deadwood, S.Dak.

Thursday, 13 July

The Kincaid children's uncle had given the children a checkup the day before. Albert, in particular, "slept better during the night" after the doctor "gave him some cough medicine." Similarly, "Dora's blisters had become infected somewhat, and the doctor took care of these too. It was really a wonderful reception that he gave us!" The group received the best news of the entire trip at the doctor's house: "What a lucky day this 13th day of July was to be! When I arrived at the house our joy was boundless when we learned that the doctor's wife was to take us one hundred sixty-five miles on our way. All of that extremely desolate region beyond the Black Hills would be passed through. The real big difficult gap in our trip would be bridged."⁴⁰

With the car packed and everyone ready, Earl told the doctor, "You surely have been very kind to us. We never will know how much this may mean to us. Some day we may be able to find a way to return it." The doctor replied, "I only wish I could have given you a better time. We did not know when you would arrive, and you were just as unable to tell us. I wish you all good luck and hope to see you again . . . Good-bye everybody!"

The doctor's wife drove the car and their son Jimmie tagged along. "How fast did we go? Just thirty miles an hour? No! Fifty miles, sixty miles in their fast machine," Earl marveled. They traveled "past the place where Preacher Smith was killed by the Indians, through Spearfish, through Belle Fourche, to Buffalo we sailed. This was real desolate country. For miles and miles there were no streams, no trees, no houses, just a few cattle in that desert grass burned country. For about seventy-five miles between Belle Fourche and Buffalo there was no town at all." The party stopped at Buffalo, ate, and bought gas before crossing the North Dakota state line. The doctor's wife dropped off Earl and the children about a mile past Bowman, North Dakota, which she remarked "seems an unmerciful place to let you off." "It probably does," Earl replied, "but if you will try to imagine us living this way ever since we have been in the Dakotas, you will not worry so much about us. We

40. Even with increased roadbuilding and boosterism in the 1920s, most tourists simply passed through northwestern South Dakota, and few migrated back to the region. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own*, pp. 106–9.

are doing this for the experience we can get out of it.”

The doctor's wife and Jimmie headed back to Lead. “She hated very much to let us out there on a road without any shade and in that burning hot sun.” Mildred, Albert, Elaine, and Earl walked back to Bowman to purchase gasoline, bread, canned goods, and milk. A truck stopped and provided the group a ten-mile ride on the way to Amidon. They ate supper and hiked again as the sun set behind a hill. “As we were marching along,” Earl recounted, “we met two ladies who had passed us on their way to Amidon and were now returning. They stopped their car to talk with the little folks who were on ahead. Usually, I became rather indignant when that was done and said mean things behind their back, because the people often held the children a long time while they were holding their luggage. That tired the children out and we needed every ounce of energy we had.” The women asked the children the usual questions, including where they planned to sleep. “Right out here on the ground,” replied Mildred. When they asked Virgil if he had trouble with the “awful heavy load” he carried, he responded, that he “could carry twice this much.”

The women offered them a sack of salted peanuts, which evaporated Earl's resentment. “It was such little acts of kindness that made our trip unforgettable.” The group walked on another mile and came to an old, deserted house. They climbed through an open window and put everything but their blanket rolls inside. It was warm inside the house, so they slept outside on the ground. In Earl's final entry for the day, he noted, “The bread was put in a combine so that the mice would not eat it up.”

Friday, 14 July

Unable to fall back asleep himself, Earl woke the children at four in the morning and they marched on. “It was a very fine cool morning to walk, except for the stiff breeze that blew in our faces. About 8:00 o'clock we stopped for some peaches and bread. North Dakota buttes were along the highway on both sides.” No ride came, and “the road was practically without traffic.” The group briefly worried when it started to rain, having no access to shelter, but it amounted to nothing.

Everyone was tired by ten that morning, but Earl thought it unwise to stop at a location with no water. The brisk wind, which remained

steady, switched from refreshingly cool to unbearably hot. The group trudged on, but “every house now was a mile or more from the road. At last we sighted a house close to the highway. What a relief it was to stop! Sore feet! Sore shoulders! Tired from head to foot.” By the time they reached the farmhouse at eleven that morning, they had walked for almost seven hours. Earl acknowledged in the travel journal that they had hiked too far for one day.

Earl, Mildred, and Albert went to the farmhouse and found a good well for water. They purchased milk and twenty-one eggs from the owners.⁴¹ “By the time [lunch] was ready, everyone was asleep. They had to be aroused, but they were too hungry to object . . . There was no eating between meals on this trip. It just wasn’t convenient.” The group then went to the well to clean up, except for Dora, who had more blisters on her feet. Later, the children wrote in their diaries, played cards, took naps, and waited for a ride.

On this occasion, they were lucky to not find a ride, as the group spent the rest of the day interacting with Ellen Pope, the owner of the farmhouse, and her mother Elizabeth Ellen Roberts—the only people aside from family that Earl provided names for in the entire travel journal.⁴² After they first stopped at the farmhouse, they met Mrs. Pope, as Earl referred to her, as she searched for hen and turkey nests in the high grass. Earl told her they saw numerous turkeys back on the road. She replied, “We must have about eighty. They are so good to clean up the grasshoppers. That is about all that we can make any money off from now. Each year we can see how we are slipping a little more behind. Maybe since wheat has gone up, it will help some of the farmers. But the trouble now is that there is no wheat.”⁴³

41. Earl purchased eggs and milk from almost every farmhouse the group visited in western North Dakota. “Although feeling the effects of the Depression, sometimes even dependent on garden produce and small business sales of farm women for butter, eggs, and poultry,” one historian explains, “rural Americans generally managed, despite uneven New Deal benefits.” McGovern, *And a Time for Hope*, p. 83.

42. For more on Elizabeth Roberts and her daughter Ellen (Roberts) Pope, see Digital Horizons, “Guide and History of Bowman and Slope Counties” (Bowman, N.Dak.: Bowman County Historical & Genealogical Society, 1984), p. 53–54, <http://digitalhorizonsonline.org/>; *Slope Saga* (Amidon, N.Dak.: Slope Saga Committee, 1976), pp. 163–67, 171–78, 185–86.

43. As one prominent historian of the state explains, “Because drought added to the difficulties caused by the depression, North Dakota suffered more than much of the rest of the nation. . . . Thousands lost their farms; more than one-third of the population lived



Ellen Pope pumps water on a farm in Slope County, North Dakota, in this photograph from the 1910s. The Neller-Kincaid party spent a day resting at Pope's farmhouse.

Pope provided information about the surrounding buttes. "Perhaps," she asked, "you read in the paper of a butte that had a slide owing to gases, just as if there might have been some volcanic action underneath?" Indeed, a person had informed Earl that they would pass a butte where an explosion occurred. Pope enlightened the group:

Well, that was written up by some reporter who wanted to just get his name in the paper. These hills are full of artesian wells. You can see all around, how in years past there have been similar slides . . . The ground got water soaked some way, probably from water pushing up from underneath for some unknown reason like artesian water does, and the

on relief; many people left the state." Elwyn Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 397.

ground just had to slide. It was too bad to have so many people driving here in their cars for nothing and spending their money and time uselessly to see this phenomenon that was no wonder at all, that I wrote into the Bowman paper. It published my letter and gave some explanation and I received a lot of notoriety that I wasn't looking for.

Pope also provided information on Black Butte, which was “just a little to the right of Sliding Butte as we call it now.” She pointed to the west, “that is Black Butte over there. It is 3,468 feet high, the highest point in the state.”⁴⁴ She continued to converse with Earl and the children and asked them for stories about themselves and who they met along their journey. She then asked the children if they would like some honey. “Oh, to be sure! Surely we do!” everyone shouted. She planned

44. For buttes in western North Dakota see Bertha Palmer, *Beauty Spots in North Dakota* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1939), pp. 91-95; “Guide and History of Bowman and Slope Counties,” pp. 44-48; *Slope Saga*, pp. 1063-65.



This image captures T. F. and Elizabeth Ellen Roberts of White Butte, North Dakota, in 1928. Elizabeth Roberts fascinated the children with stories of growing up in western North Dakota and her impressive knowledge of regional history.

to make biscuits with honey for the children. "Oh, boy! Won't that taste swell!" Albert declared emphatically. "Now, don't stop any rides," Dora exclaimed. "We want that honey."

At five o'clock, Albert, Virgil and Earl went to Pope's farmhouse and returned with eighteen hot biscuits and a large bowl of honey. She instructed them, "Now, if you by chance get a ride, just leave the bowl on the side of the road and I will get it." Earl wrote, "Can you imagine how good that meal must have tasted after being without those things for so long and after such hard hiking?" Earl and the children "thanked the lady a thousand times for her courtesies."

The group then hiked about a mile after sundown toward the farmhouse of Elizabeth Roberts, who met them on the road with three quarts of milk. Earl hoped to press on, but Roberts's stories fascinated the children. After Elaine asked when she arrived in the area, the woman responded, "I was only eight years old. The roads were so poor in those days that I have heard my father tell how he would have to take a wagon apart in order to get it around a hill." Albert then asked if "the Indians ever hurt" her father. "No," Roberts replied, though she claimed that eight would-be settlers to the area had been killed by an unidentified band of American Indians, presumably decades earlier. "We have looked everywhere for the graves of these eight men," she noted, "but no one has found them yet." The children continued asking questions about American Indians and the Black Hills, and Roberts offered more amusing stories, including about sites the group had seen along the way, such as Battle Mountain and Bear Butte, explaining that the Lakota had called the latter Mato Paha, or Bear Mountain, "because of its resemblance to a reclining bear."

Earl wished to move on, but as Carolyn remarked of Roberts's stories, "we don't get this every day in the week." Mrs. Roberts said more about Chalk Mountain, Sentinel Butte, and the North Dakota badlands, captivating the children with stories of shells and petrified wood. Earl asked if he and the children could spend the night in the Roberts's wheat field, to which she replied that she and her husband would not object. The travel journal entry for that day concluded, "We thanked her for her very entertaining talk. The children remarked that she must know a very great deal and read lots."



Elizabeth Roberts told the children stories about the landscapes of North Dakota, including the state's badlands, seen in this 1930s photograph of a stretch of road between Dickinson and Medora.

Saturday, 15 July

Earl and the children walked toward Amidon before the sun rose. "Marching in the hot sun is punishment," Earl observed. No trucks came by that morning. By seven o'clock in the morning, the children were hungry. To urge them along, Earl remarked, "We will eat when we get to the top of that hill!" When they reached the top of the hill, they saw a farmhouse about half a mile away. They all agreed to continue on and stop there for breakfast.

The group "went into the farmhouse and bought a quart of milk before it had come from the cow." Virgil waited for it. While eating breakfast, a half-ton Ford truck came by and agreed to give them a three-mile ride into Amidon. The truck took them to the post office where they wrote some letters. "We had scarcely gotten everything together when I found a man who was going twenty-five miles, all the way to New En-

gland. What a joy that was to us! No one could be grouchy under such circumstances. It would be only sixty-five [miles] more from that town to Hebron.”

At noon the group arrived at a park in New England, twenty-nine miles from Dickinson. An opportunity came for a five-mile ride, but they hadn't purchased groceries. Around a half past three that afternoon, two high school girls—who Earl assumed approached the group at the suggestion of their mother—brought them lemonade and cookies. “We thought maybe you folks would like a little refreshment,” one of the young ladies said. Earl replied that the group must “look very tired, because everyone in this section of the country is very good to us.” They talked with the girls for about an hour, thanked them for their kindness, and hiked out of New England.

At half past eight, they stopped in a wheat field to spend the night. A cold wind blew, and Earl placed several wheat bundles around the children to block the breeze. Heavy black clouds blocked the moon and stars and brought with them the fear of rain. Earl rose later that night and “built a little bridge of wheat bundles” over the children to block any imminent rain. Earl consoled himself by writing “that it seldom rains in this part of the country.” Indeed, the amount of rain was minimal, and Earl went back to sleep. In contrast, in her account of the day, Mildred, perhaps speaking for the rest of the group, noted, “I was tired and slept like a log.”

Sunday, 16 July

Earl woke up the children early and “for three hours we plodded along.” They stopped at a farmhouse around six that morning, but the farmer was still in bed. Approaching a turn in the road, “some of the children crossed the field in order to cut off a square corner and frightened the jack rabbits nearly to death. They seemed to hop along almost like kangaroos. We could laugh at them even though we were almost famished.”

Earl found a young man milking a cow at another farmhouse. He asked for the cost of the milk and the young man answered, “Oh, nothing at all. Milk isn't worth much anyway.” Earl gave the young man a dime for his troubles, which he took reluctantly. They ate breakfast and hiked on in the sweltering heat. “My! What a hot journey that tramp

was! There was no breeze,” Earl remarked. “The water just rolled down our faces. The hot air rose up from the earth and nearly suffocated us.”

At the next farmhouse, the children hung their sweaters on the fence to make shade, purchased eggs, and had lunch. Virgil took a nap: “It would have been a shame to awaken him. I had improvised a little shade for him by throwing my overcoat over the mailbox. That shielded his head at least from the hot sun. So we let him sleep, and pulled him up a little farther each time that the sun threatened to get in this face.” Earl continued, “one could not help but be amused to see how the children passed the time away playing cards or writing in their diaries . . . Mildred and Elaine had monopolized the little spot of shade cast by a roll of wooden snow fences . . . The rest of the children took what shade was given them by their sweaters on the fence.” Earl described their predicament. “Was it hot? Hot! Why, there was no word for it! It was lit-



In this photograph, the children drape their sweaters over a fence line to make shade and find some relief from the scorching heat.

erally scorching, because the crops were burning up. The wind did not blow. The cattle stoop across the road and bellowed for water. Finally, the farmer got them and drove them to a filthy, muddy hole, because the windmill would pump no water. I sat in the shade of a small telephone pole.”

About two o'clock that afternoon, the children—except Virgil, who napped for nearly three hours—went ahead. Earl watched them march out of sight down the hot, dusty road, again remarking on the sweltering weather: “The hot air seemed to fairly dance above the road as it does when the radiator of a car becomes hot. I watched them until they were out of sight.” Virgil and Earl then filled their canteens with dirty water from the farmhouse well and left to catch up with the group. The group continued going from farmhouse to farmhouse that scorching afternoon. Earl purchased eggs and milk, opened whichever canned good attracted the children, and they hiked on. After a meal, they washed up, found or made shade, and wrote in their diaries. “It is impossible to tell just how far we had hiked,” Earl observed, “but we were anxious to cover the halfway mark to Dickinson that day.” A few minutes after seven o'clock that evening, a sedan took the four girls and all the packs and drove ahead two miles, “a very welcome ‘lift’ after our severe test under the hot sun with no breeze.”

Earl, Virgil, and Albert hiked to where the girls were let off. At camp, the girls “had carefully arranged each one’s belongings separately. They were such charming little creatures. They seldom quarreled, they tried to please each other and to please me.” They trekked on until night approached, eventually finding a spot to camp “at a place where the road was cut through a hill, a deep gully lay on either side of the road. The surface was a little rough from stones, but we thought that it would afford us good protection from the cool evening wind that usually came up before morning.” Elaine provided the last children’s diary entry recorded in Earl’s travel journal. She summarized the day’s travels and noted that the group eventually chose to camp “near a snow fence. It was dark. We unrolled our rolls and went to bed.”

Monday, 17 July

The last entry in Earl’s travel journal was 17 July 1933. The group woke up a quarter after four following a damp and cold night where “the gul-

ly acted like a funnel through which the wind rushed as if to shove us out." A stiff, cool breeze pushed them along in the early morning hours, "But it soon became the same old story, we were warm, tired, and hungry." They needed to reach Dickinson by Tuesday night or they would be out of groceries. Earl assumed they might have to eat their emergency "hard tack," but "eggs and milk were easy to get."

At seven in the morning they saw a farmhouse up ahead where they could stop and eat breakfast. As they approached, a sign discouraging salesmen read, "NO AGENTS NOT ALLOWED." The man of the house saw them approaching and offered them eggs and milk. Earl asked the man if they could camp out at the farmhouse and wait for a ride. "I told him we would park out in front all day, unless picked up by someone. This seemed all right to him." Earl started the stove, but just as he added the eggs the children hailed a truck filled with stones. The driver agreed to take the group to Dickinson. "We kept the eggs in the hot water, grabbed our scattered packs and food, and piled on the truck . . . Virgil shoved his soft-boiled eggs in his pocket. Soon they began to ooze down to his skin, and he discovered that he had a mess to deal with."

The driver unloaded them on the outskirts of Dickinson. As had become the standard routine, "Right away we found a bunch of curious men, women, and children anxious to know all about us. Surely, we could eat right under the tree in front of the house. We were just to



Photographer Arthur Rothstein captured this image of a farm near Dickinson, North Dakota, in 1936. The severe drought conditions that the Neller-Kincaid group observed three years earlier continued to plague the region.

make ourselves at home.” They finished their breakfast by ten in the morning and walked through Dickinson, mailed some postcards, and waited for a ride to Hebron.

The journey’s end was near. “Think of it! Only forty miles and our trip of 850 miles would be completed. That was a long way to travel with six young children. Our faces and arms were brown from the sun and wind. Our hair was long and needed washing. Our clothes were soiled, because there were no good North Dakota streams to wash them in. How we did miss the clear, refreshing water of the Black Hills!” They first camped near the Dickinson Grocery Company but decided to move on to a Red Crown Oil Supply Station, where Earl decided they would “stay for a day or two in order to rest up, unless someone gave us a ride.”

In the early afternoon they ate bread and opened a can of peaches. Abruptly, Carolyn stood up and shouted, “Oh, look! There’s our blue car! There goes mother!” Earl didn’t believe it was Lydia. “Yes, it is mother!” Carolyn proclaimed, “I saw her! She isn’t even stopping!” She ran after the car shouting and waving her hands frantically, “Yoo, hoo! Mother, Yoo, hoo!” Elaine joined in, “Stop, mother, stop!” Mildred and Dora ran out, with bread in hand and peaches falling to the ground, “Yoo, hoo! Yoo, hoo! Y—O—O, H—O—O!”

Earl described the scene: “The children danced all over the road. They ran after her. Then stopped. They shouted all sorts of queer noises. Still the car moved slowly on. They could not catch her. In vain did they still shout and scream. At first they danced in glee as the Indians dance. Then there was a distressing feeling that came over their faces. Mother had not seen them. Miss all that ride! Walk all that way to Hebron! Forty more miles! I should say not! And their faces were sad.”

Earl, now convinced it was Lydia, flagged down a passing car. “Oh, mister, catch that car! There goes my car!” The driver didn’t comprehend. “Mister, that lady is my wife. She has come to Dickinson to get us and has missed us. Will you catch that car!” The driver spotted the car in question, turned around, and drove off. Earl and the children went back to their meal. Minutes passed. “Wouldn’t it be a note now, if it wasn’t she?” Earl said. A blue vehicle came towards them; everyone got excited, but it turned out to be a half-ton truck. Another blue vehicle, a car this time, came over the brow of a hill. The children “screamed and made all sorts of gesticulations and noises. People near us laughed at

us. But we didn't care, it was really our car." Lydia said as she arrived, "I never saw you as we drove by!"

After various expressive greetings, they noticed Lydia's car had three passengers. She brought acquaintances with her to Dickinson, not expecting to meet Earl and the children. No one seemed to care. "We decided to see how much could be piled on, and how many could be piled in. The packs and haversacks were placed on the fenders and running board. By good fortune, the luggage carrier was still on. I sat on the right front fender with one leg over the lamp. Virgil sat on the left front fender. Albert, and later Carolyn, stood on the running board. Our seven to mother's four made eleven."

The car traveled at only fifteen to twenty miles per hour with its precarious load. On the outskirts of Taylor, a swift rainstorm made those on the outside wet, but the heat quickly returned and dried them off. At Taylor, they stopped and called Lydia's family to bring a car. Earl and the children arrived in Hebron by five o'clock that evening. Earl's last entry concluded, "Thus ended our hitch-hiking trip of about eight hundred fifty miles."

Conclusion

Earl Neller left St. Louis in mid-June 1933, hoping to provide six children an experience they would never forget. The summary of their trip, found in his travel journal, referenced the struggles and hardships the children went through, but it also detailed uplifting experiences and friendly interactions with numerous individuals. Earl regarded the cattle car ride through the Badlands of western South Dakota, accompanied by a group of young migrant workers, as a "priceless experience." A sick Elaine being in the right place at the right time resulted in the group getting a lift from Hill City to Rapid City. Earl remarked of the incident, "Little experiences like this have already taught the children some valuable lessons. Minutes are precious sometimes." Similarly, when the doctor's wife felt guilty about leaving them in "an unmerciful place" a mile past Bowman, Earl reiterated that the group was "doing this for the experience we can get out of it."

The journey would not have succeeded without friendly assistance they received at several farms and homes. Earl and the children made frequent stops to wash up and fill their canteens with water. Earl



Earl Neller took this photo of the kids swimming at the Minnekahta Open Air Plunge in Hot Springs. Earl commented that the pool was “just a little too deep for the children to enjoy it.”

bought milk and eggs at farmhouses, sometimes receiving items at no cost. At one such stop, the children ate milk and cookies as the woman of the house drove off with a list of items—and some of Earl’s money—to purchase groceries from a nearby store. At a farmhouse where a sign read, “Private. Keep Out,” they nonetheless found assistance from “another helpful lady.” A Keystone resident offered Earl and the children a spot to sleep next to his house and the use of the front room if it rained. As Earl acknowledged on one of their last days on the road, “it was such little acts of kindness that made our trip unforgettable.”

Countless truck and car rides advanced the troop and brought welcome relief from hiking. Trucks—including a poultry truck, a gas truck, a logging truck, a truck with Wyoming license plates, as well as several Civilian Conservation Corp trucks—stopped when the children shouted, “Give us a ride!” One stock truck even provided a seventy-mile ride from White Lake to Presho. As Earl observed, “Thirty-five or forty

miles an hour was fast compared to one mile an hour on foot.” Cars belonging to individuals, couples, and families provided welcome “lifts.” The one-hundred-and-sixty-five-mile car ride from Lead to Bowman they received from the doctor’s wife signified that “the real difficult gap in our trip would be bridged.” Occasionally, a vehicle carried some of the children and everyone’s packs and gear a few miles down the road. They also made short trips riding on fenders and running boards.

The children also helped each other. After hiking through the rain to reach Hill City, both Dora and Carolyn helped carry a coughing Albert’s bag. Virgil, who noticed his father carrying the heavier items, offered to help. Albert and Virgil carried Mildred’s pack for a time. They played cards, studied French, built a wooden fort, collected rocks, swam, played with local children, and read the newspaper together. “It was interesting,” Earl wrote, “to see how considerate they all were of one another.”

Earl’s travel journal offered memorable descriptions of drought scenes, most notably during the ride between White Lake and Presho, where he spotted burnt crops and an overabundance of grasshoppers. The heat, which Earl characterized as “sweltering” and “terrible” was at times unbearable. As Earl remarked on Saturday, 15 July, “marching in the hot sun is punishment.” They adjusted their start times in western North Dakota accordingly, waking up early and hiking before the sun rose.

Signs of the ongoing economic depression were present. Most notably, during the cattle car train ride to Rapid City, they rode with forty young men who Earl described as “out of a job through no fault of their own.” The group met numerous Civilian Conservation Corps laborers working throughout the Black Hills in various camps. A young man who conversed with Earl at a farmhouse in North Dakota remarked that milk “isn’t worth much anyway.” Ellen Pope, in North Dakota, revealed that the turkeys were “so good to clean up the grasshoppers” before noting that “each year we can see how we are slipping a little more behind.” At the same time, Earl and the children readily bought both fresh and canned food at grocery stores throughout their trip. They also encountered a variety of workers, such as when they caught a ride from a man who worked on the local roads outside of Hot Springs, or when they encountered a night watchman at the flour plant in Sturgis. They

also took part in an active tourist economy, paying for tickets to various cave tours and museums.

Carolyn, the oldest Neller, made copies of the travel journal for her family in the 1980s. The copies included an introductory note that Carolyn made regarding the Neller-Kincaid adventure: "I am bemused by my re-reading it. In 1933 the country was still in the depths of a terrible depression. And yet when I think back to that summer it was without a doubt the most conflict-free time of my entire childhood . . . In part, it was because Earl was a natural teacher with a good deal of curiosity and imagination."⁴⁵

After more than five decades, Carolyn recollected the family's pre-trip correspondence and the consternation some expressed about six children hitchhiking through South Dakota. "I can still recall the letters and cards from both Lydia and Earl's relatives flying back and forth in the months before the trip. The message in most was that Earl was crazy and irresponsible and would end up killing the kids from both families with his hair-brained [sic] schemes." Carolyn's note also referenced her friendship with Dora Kincaid and several of their memorable interactions during the trip. "Dora taught me to play 'Honeymoon Bridge' and we played it incessantly. I still think a good meal would be a loaf of bread cut into seven hunks with canned beans or fruit on top! We also learned the parts of the brain as we hiked and one of our favorite ways of teasing was to say, 'your medulla oblongata must be in your feet.' Dora was my best friend and absolute idol all through high school. She was generous and kind and seemed able to do anything. She often sewed clothes for me. I was a painfully shy ugly duckling, and she was the head of the 'in' group, always at the center of everything."

Unfortunately, as Carolyn's introductory note detailed, three members of the Neller-Kincaid group experienced untimely deaths: "Albert was killed by falling when he was watching a Veiled Prophet parade (Mardi Gras time) in St. Louis. I think he was 12 at the time." Mildred's firstborn daughter Scherrill died when she was just ten months old, and shortly after, as Carolyn noted, "Mildred committed suicide." She was "in her late teens or early 20s at the time of her death." Finally, Vir-

45. Both Carolyn and Elaine's introductory notes are found in the accession file correspondence, "Earl H. Neller Journal—South Dakota Hitchhiking Trip, June/July 1933" (H2020-002), South Dakota State Archives.

gil, Carolyn's brother, died "on his first day at the front in World War II at the Battle of the Bulge. He is buried at a U.S. Military Cemetery near Strasbourg France and I have been to visit his grave."

The second oldest Neller child, Elaine, provided an introduction to copies of Earl's travel journal made for her family in the 2010s. "This is a historic log of an enterprising young man with a dream," she wrote. "A man who braved all sorts of hardships to give six young children the trip of a lifetime, leading them on a long, difficult hiking, hitchhiking, and freight train boxcar trip through the Black Hills and Badlands of South Dakota in 1933. My, how times have changed." As Elaine observed, "An adventure like this would be out of the question today. But Earl Neller, age 39 at the time, in spite of a monstrous depression, wanted his three children and three of their friends to experience the trials and thrills of this trip as a building block for their education in their future." Elaine concluded, "How many young men do you know who have the boldness to do this today? We know that the value of this experience for the young children, and yes, also Earl, cannot be measured."

In the summer of 1933, a high school teacher from Missouri guided six children across South Dakota, among the Black Hills, and through western North Dakota, navigating 850 miles over twenty-seven days during the Great Depression. Indeed, Elaine's reference to "the trip of a lifetime" is a fitting summary of the group's journey.