Going Diagonal

PART II

Walking an 'X' across Colorado

India H. Wood celebrates the high point of her 740-mile hike on top of San Luis Peak, elevation 14,023 feet, in the San Juan Mountains.

Ryan Ernstes

nal

by INDIA H. WOOD

In 2020, India H. Wood of Boulder walked nearly 750 miles across Colorado in a diagonal line from the state's southeast corner to its northwest corner – an expedition she recounted in her Colorado Life *May/June 2022 story "Going Diagonal." She now brings us the story of her journey last year along the state's other diagonal, where her goal was to meet people and learn about their connections to the land across Colorado.*

IN THE QUIET of Colorado's northeastern corner, a meadowlark trilled from its far western Nebraska perch. Then, "BANG!" My friend Jim in his blue "Amen" ballcap fired his starting pistol. I yelped, having forgotten the blast was my idea.

The shot had been the signal for me to begin my second diagonal hike across Colorado. My friend Dennis Lyamkin had started the previous diagonal hike with me on May 11, 2020, at the manhole cover marking the state's southeast corner. Now, on May 20, 2022, Dennis was with me once again as we ceremonially lifted our feet off a head-size concrete block embedded with a bronze geological survey marker proclaiming, "NORTHEAST CORNER COLORADO."

My plan for the 2022 diagonal: Stride steadily uphill along the South Platte River basin past Julesburg, Sterling, Fort Morgan and Aurora to South Park, in Park County, where the river begins. Then I would make my rocky way to the Continental Divide west of Buena Vista, slip into the Gunnison River basin and struggle across the formidable San Juan Mountains of Silverton and Rico and dip into the desert beyond Cortez to the Four Corners. Mostly solo.

Dennis bounced me over the northeast monument's fence into Jim's hands like catcher's mitts. The previous night, Jim and Charlene Dolezal had hosted me, Dennis and filmmaker Ryan Ernstes at their tidy farm, where we had all toasted my odd route across the state with an ancient bottle of moonshine.

Charlene strode with Dennis and me south on Sedgwick County Road 63. Two shaggy donkeys eyed us between bites of spring grass, then scurried away suspiciously. I'm sure they'd seen grain trucks, pickups, fertilizer vats, but never humans with backpacks. We elbowed a turn west on County Road 34, through the Dolezals' land. Charlene's presence connected us with the fields here, soil she and her husband had tended for decades. She knew who owned each parcel, their family histories, and the hailstorms and grain price fluctuations that had shaped this place.

A cold west wind carried the scent of earth and fertilizer from checkerboard fields of last year's pale corn stalks, the green of young wheat and fallow brown. My feet were not allowed to cut across private fields, so I stuck to dirt county roads, zig-zagging south on County Road 61.5, west on 32, south on 61, west on 30. I would walk roads across Colorado's Great Plains for nearly 300 miles until I reached the trail-tracked Rocky Mountains at Sedalia.

ON MAY 25 I was again joined by filmmaker Ryan Ernstes and her video camera. Ryan would film my journey at several points for her documentary, *Diagonal*, which would premiere at the 2023 5Point Adventure Film Festival.

No corn fields here, south of I-76 near Fleming. Our trail shoes sank into sand dunes held down by sand sage, vindictive cacti and last year's dried wildflowers. Prairie lizards and common lesser earless lizards with orange spots hopped like popcorn from our footsteps. Ryan and I rubbed cylindrical leaves of sand sage, then inhaled the rich scent from our fingers.

The land we were walking is part of the legendary Condon Ranch, leased by Jimmy Mitchell. He manages it with the philosophy that God put all these plants here for a reason, so he shouldn't try to spray herbicide on everything that wasn't grass. Jimmy said forbs (non-woody flowering plants other than grasses) were an important source of nutrition for cattle and kept the sand in place. Jimmy knew how the dirt and plants worked here, his wife's family having farmed and ranched near Crook for generations.

The wind-flapped map Jimmy had bestowed upon me showed his inked line for my hike that led through several pastures to his triangle tent symbol drawn next to a blue-circle stock tank in a pasture labelled "East Smith." When I visited earlier on a scouting expedition, Jimmy had showed me how to turn on the water there. We followed his line, meeting a little snake ringed in white, red and black, a jackrabbit fleeing over the horizon, an eagle and a pronghorn buck that snorted like a pneumatic wrench. Jimmy leased this ranch but looked after the land like he owned it. Jimmy knew sandhills.

And Bob Musgrave knew roads. He had driven the Morgan County gravel truck half a million miles in a square county only 36 miles wide and long, centered on the town of Fort Morgan. My zigzag route along my diagonal required five places to pitch my tent solo in Bob's county. Bob helped me work out three: his and his wife's house in Fort Morgan, at his childhood school (now abandoned) at Ninemile Corner and at Rosener Reservoir (now empty) above his family's farm.

Just as important, Bob knew where the few shade trees grew along the Morgan County roads. It was June 12, and I was wilting on my walk as if I were in a 93-degree oven clicking with grasshoppers. Up ahead beckoned two cottonwoods, one with two trunks like a hippie-hand peace sign along the county road. Bob had promised this "nice lunch

Horses graze on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation along Highway 160 near the southwest corner of Colorado. Rising 25 miles in the distance in New Mexico is the 1,583-foot-tall rock formation known as Shiprock, or Tsé Bit'a'í ("winged rock") by the Diné.

India Wood

India Wood

Ryan Ernstes

Ryan Ernstes

India Wood

The challenges Wood faced included planning her own route, hiking 100 miles in the San Juans at elevations between 10,000 and 13,000 feet above sea level, dining in bear country near Bailey and bedbugs in an old telegraph building east of Pitkin.

spot" if I took a half-mile detour onto County Road 14 on my way from the old school to his farm near Rosener Reservoir.

A herd of black Angus cows and calves stared at me from the trees – their lunchroom for the cool kids, their dark hides lumpy extensions of the tree's shadows. One calf had a milk mustache.

I imagined them conferring with each other: "Don't move. She's gonna try to take our shade."

"Hi ladies!" I called in a singsong.

Hooves shifted; noses sniffed at me.

I sneaked closer to see if they were friendly. "Mind if I share your shade? I'll go around you to that smaller tree since y'all like the big one."

"Muuuh! Mooo." Wet noses stretched toward me as I walked among my bovine sisters to the junior cottonwood. The rancher had put a fence around it to guard the tree from being trampled. The scent of cow manure wafted around me as I shoe-nudged cow pies out of my picnic spot, leaned my pack against the hog panel fence, retrieved my lunch and sat down.

Yellow ear tag #89 sniffed my head; she had a combover and a cleft between her nostrils. Her sidekick, green ear tag #6 in a windblown hairdo, stretched her head toward my corn chips, ears forward.

I looked up at their chins. Each cow I met now had an individual personality. These cows were like thousand-pound black Labrador dogs; most cows would not let me near them. I wondered what kind of human cared for them as I watched an SUV pull away from a ranch house a half mile west. My lungs tensed, worried the rancher would be angry that I was beneath their tree.

"Good morning!" I called as I walked to their open car window. "Is it OK if I eat my lunch here? You have really friendly cows."

"Where you headed?" The young man at the wheel smiled kindly. His wife was in the back seat with their new baby.

"I'm camping at Rosener Reservoir tonight. Bob Musgrave is helping me out."

"Musgraves are good people. You're welcome to have your lunch here."

I was walking alone now, but I was not lonely. People helped me, then handed

India Wood

Ryan Ernstes

Fern Mandel

Wood stops for a few photo ops along the trail, posing with Dennis Lyamkin at Julesburg, with Dennis and Jim and Charlene Dolezal at the marker at the state's northeast corner and with Tina Zimmerman on her property in South Park.

me on to other good people. Even the cattle were good company. Heck, I even met a ghost I liked. All made me feel welcome on their landscapes.

BY JUNE 23, my arrival at the Cherokee Ranch, in the foothills near Sedalia, marked the end of the Plains portion of my trip. The ranch has been a non-profit since founder Mildred Montague Genevieve "Tweet" Kimball died in 1999. I had tried calling and emailing to get permission to hike across the ranch but had not received a definitive answer. The Cherokee Ranch website said its 5 square miles were "closed to hiking without a guide," but it did offer daily tours of the Scottish castle that housed Tweet's relics. I booked a tour as an excuse to enter.

"NO TRESPASSING" signs marked the wooden rail fence around the Cherokee Ranch. Sandstone bluffs hovered above dark green clouds of gambel oak and mountain mahogany footed with grassy meadows where ponderosa stood like sentinels. I stepped onto the private road, deciding a walk with a wave on the road would be less incriminating than a furtive ramble through the gambel. Grasshoppers rattled like castanets to accompany the stuttery "tow tow tow heee!" of towhees and buzz of iridescent hummingbirds.

The ghost of Cherokee Minotaur, Tweet Kimball's favorite Santa Gertrudis bull, gazed at me from two bronze sculptures along the road. There were no monuments to her four ex-husbands. I started to feel a kinship with Tweet; we both loved cattle.

A front door of oak and wrought iron creaked open to release a tour guide herding several women in high-heeled sandals and flowery shirts from Tweet's Scottish castle, atop a Colorado hill. Local rhyolite stone shaped by Welsh stonemasons and angled slate roofs gleamed silver beneath a sapphire sky.

The guide's head shot up at the sight of a hiker in a polyester livestock ballcap, stained scarf and hiking poles that looked like they'd done battle with Minotaur. I wanted to tell her my scarf was Hermès and I'd graduated from Dartmouth. She assured me the executive director would

meet with me after the tour regarding my request to hike through the ranch.

The castle tour revealed Tweet as a female renegade, one I dearly wanted to have tea with but had missed by 23 years. Tweet collected portraits of powerful women of Renaissance England and a suit of armor. She joined the National Western Stock Show board as its first female member. She wanted her guests to sleep in a Renaissance bed of polished black wood that would not fit up the stairs, so she had it hauled through the second-story window. She, like me, was undeterred by practicality. I kneeled ceremonially at the "begging door," where poor itinerants would show up at a Scottish castle to seek accommodation.

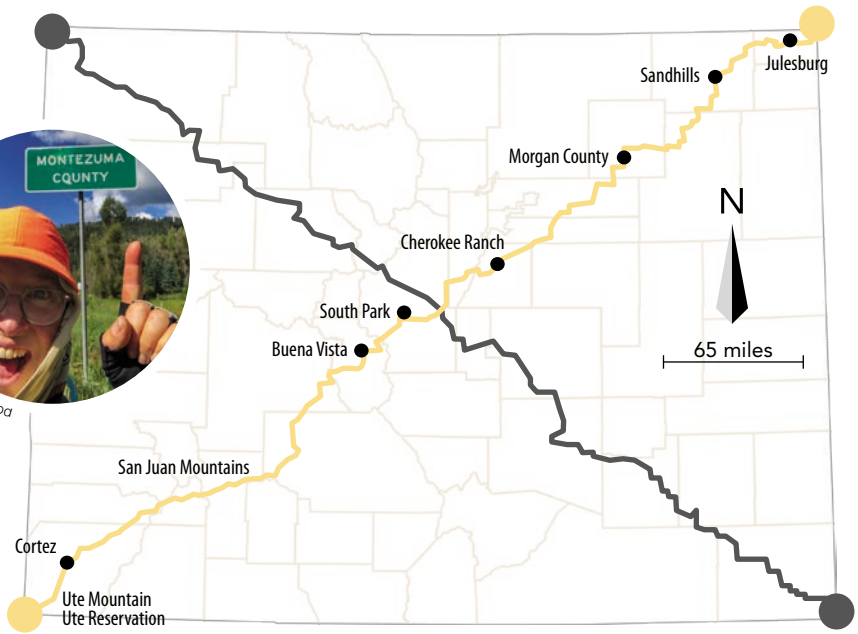
"Good to meet you. Rafael said you might be here." James Allen Holmes, the executive director of Cherokee Ranch, beamed down from a foot above my head. "When are you hoping to hike across the ranch?

"Right now. I hiked the entrance road today."

"You didn't drive here? Today?" His brow furrowed. "I thought next week or something." He laughed. "Well, then, I can't tell you 'no' and make you turn around since you're already halfway across. Can I get a picture with you? I think it is remarkable what you are doing, hiking across Colorado solo."

Thus, approved by Tweet and James, I strolled west on the road through the ranch like I owned it.

India Wood



Start date: **May 20, 2022**
End date: **Aug. 30, 2022**
Miles hiked in 2022: **739**

2022 Diagonal Route
2020 Diagonal Route

NEARLY 90 MILES later, on July 7, I hustled downhill with my daughter, Fern, Ryan and a cameraperson into South Park. My mother wrote a book published in 1969 called *Colorado: Big Mountain Country.* Of this area she reported, "One rancher has erected a sign on U.S. 24 as it runs through his property at South Park, an almost uninhabited, nearly treeless plain about a hundred square miles in size. The sign reads: 'No Loitering.' "

White cubes of RVs now dotted the tawny prairie below us, the Buffalo Peaks and Mosquito Range a hazy blue lip on the distant edge of South Park. The assortment of summer abodes included a green delivery trailer with a door cut in the side, a cat carrier deposited next to an address marker and a pallet palace slapped together next to the carcass of a red Chevy on cinderblocks. Limp barbed-wire fences caught trash bags like fluttering birds. This had been the major calving area for pronghorn antelope; the few that remained bolted awkwardly between all these new structures.

Three retrievers gamboled toward us, barking and wagging, followed by Tina Zimmerman, a woman in a peek-a-boo hat, crocheted blue bikini, turquoise cycling shorts and half-laced army boots. She was wrinkled and effervescent. She said she loved my journey and the idea of minimal living.

"I don't have to have material things," Tina said, squinting into the distance. "I am going to find my true happiness, and I am going to get rid of all my stuff."

"Is that a barber's chair?" I said.

"I'm a barber, and I collect barber chairs, so yes."

Fern spun lazily on the white Naugahyde top.

"Can I sit in the queen's chair?" I pointed to a turreted wooden chair with a red leather seat.

"Yes, you may. It has a little bird poop on it." Tina picked her way over drifts of scavenged lumber to wipe it off.

I gave a Queen Elizabeth wave from the throne of Tina's kingdom. I could see from here why people deposited themselves along lonely roads across South Park and did what they darn well pleased. Like Tina said, "This makes me happy, my happiness. I'm alone but I'm not lonely. Lovin' life, girlies!"

My thoughts exactly. Back in Boulder, the city would be on you like lice for code violations with a place like this.

I continued to hike my diagonal past Buena Vista, over the Sawatch Range, across the Gunnison valley, through the San Juan Mountains and down several thousand feet to Cortez. I had been worrying about the final 40 miles for weeks.

Thus far on my 1,500-mile journey I had obtained permission to cross private, state and U.S. government-owned lands. The last 40 miles of my diagonal line, however, coursed across the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation where I hoped I might hike the dirt roads shown on my GPS.

I called the tribal offices and requested permission to hike across their land. They said, "No outsiders." I understood why, as non-Natives like me had occupied most Indigenous land and tried to destroy their culture. This reservation, the adjacent Southern Ute Reservation and the Uintah and Ouray Reservation

India Wood

Wood celebrates her completion of the Colorado X on Aug. 30, 2022, at the Four Corners Monument with documentary filmmaker Ryan Ernstes, daughter Fern Mandel, Jim Ague, best friend Marjorie Ague Eiref and cameraperson Jordyn Romero.

in Utah are all that is left of Ute lands that once encompassed most of western Colorado and beyond.

My only option was to walk the shoulders of the highways through the reservation: Highway 491 (formerly Highway 666, the Devil's Highway) and Highway 160, both infamous for accidents.

A reconnaissance drive of the last 9 miles to the state corner left me doubtful I would reach my goal. Bulldozers and backhoes belched diesel fumes as they rebuilt and repaved Highway 160. I wondered if the highway workers would stop me, citing safety concerns.

Instead, on hike day we introduced ourselves. Diné and Ute highway workers gave me, Fern and a friend cold bottles of water in the rippling 95-degree heat and radioed ahead, "Yeah, we got the hikers here at mile marker four. Headed your way." They cheered us on. We were all people doing our thing on a highway through a surreal landscape: Shiprock sailing in the southern haze, Sleeping Ute Mountain resting behind us.

I reached the Four Corners Monument cattle guard the afternoon of Aug. 30. I was cut off from the destination landscape I had worshipped for three months, my view restricted to a vast concrete and steel installation of ramps, guard rails, benches and souvenir stalls.

I set my pack outside the Four Corners medallion that proclaimed bureaucratically, "FOUR STATES HERE MEET IN FREEDOM UNDER GOD." A hurried woman asked me to move my pack to get it out of her picture with her grown son. I explained we just needed another minute, and that I had walked here 740 miles from Nebraska. To which she replied curtly, "You have brought your pack 740 miles, and now you can move it."

I wanted to belong here, but I wasn't feeling welcome. Then my friend's dad announced to a dozen tourists what I had just accomplished. Three groovy young men from Germany took pictures with me and asked for advice on places to visit in Colorado. A woman holding a diapered infant congratulated me. "We are going to think about you as we drive back to Georgia," she said, "but I'd rather drive to Georgia than walk across Colorado."

"You never know what is inside you until you try," I said. "I was never a serious hiker until several years ago – never had hiked further than maybe 5 miles."

"Wow. That's so cool." The mother smiled at me like I was Neil Armstrong.

"As a trail friend said, 'An inch is a cinch; a yard is hard.' Do a little bit at a time and work up from that. One day, then another, like becoming a mother and raising a child." Her baby flapped the Friends of India's Diagonal Expedition postcard I'd given them.

I had fancied the governor of Colorado and crews from 9News in Denver would greet me. They didn't. Instead, portraits and landscapes came to my mind – the workers of Highway 160, the South Park of Tina, Bob's country, Jimmy's sandhills ranch, Darlene and Jim's corner. I unclipped the Colorado flag I had displayed on the back of my pack for 1,471 diagonal miles, smoothed it over the four state corners, folded it and kissed the symbol of the state and people I love.

To learn more about India and her journey, visit IndiaHWood.com.

THE CREEDE HOTEL & RESTAURANT

Serving the community since 1892

Daily specials by Chef John Arp
Live entertainment & local art
Event Catering: all sizes, kinds, locations
Outdoor dining under our Mega-tent
Historic downtown setting
Period hotel rooms

www.thecreedehotel.com
For reservations call 719-658-2608

CREEDE REPERTORY THEATRE

Our 58th Season | May 19 - Sept 16

Rodgers + Hammerstein's
CINDERELLA

Ken Ludwig's
DEAR JACK, DEAR LOUISE

MOUNTAIN OCTOPUS
by Beth Kander

CLUE: ON STAGE
by Sandy Rustin

THE ROYALE
by Marco Ramirez

BOOMTOWN!
Improv Comedy

GO REP!

See a different show every night.
Save when you book tickets
to 3 or more shows!

CREEDEREP.ORG | (719) 658-2540 | CREEDE, CO

Eat • Play • Stay • Swim • Soak • Camp • Fish • Hike • Bike • Nordic Ski • Snowshoe

Pioneer Village Museum

Fly Fish The Colorado River

Williams Fork Reservoir

Hot Sulphur Springs is...

- nestled in the **Rocky Mountains** waiting to be explored
- filled with **pioneer, railroad & Native American history**
- the **county seat** & oldest town in the ❤ of Grand County
- **gold medal fishing** on the Colorado River
- named for the **historic hot springs**

GRAND COUNTY
COLORADO ★ USA

hot sulphur springs
chamber of commerce
www.hsschamber.com