

Our Trip Takes Us

Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

As a traveling family we sure have taken advantage of the land set aside for public use. Nearly every day we visit a city, county, state or national park. Public lands are part of what make our journey possible and exciting. In 1916, when the national government decided to begin preserving land for public use, it set something in motion that benefits millions of people, plants and animals. I just don't think I ever took the time to appreciate that.

One example of a great preservation effort by the National Parks is the Effigy Mounds in the northeast corner of Iowa. We visited the mounds on a chilly, rainy day. We were trying to wait out the rain in the RV, when Dan finally said we should just brave the elements and head out into the woods. Under the canopy of the heavily wooded forest, we were actually spared much of the downpour. Also, we practically had the whole place to ourselves, which is always a bonus at a tourist attraction. It made the experience peaceful in a way.

After climbing some steep trails we found ourselves on level land. There were clearings in the trees. It was here we saw the mounds. Some of these are thousands of years old effigies built by the woodland Indians. Some of the mounds were round hills, others shaped like long cylinders with bulbs at each end. The most interesting were the animal shapes, the bears and eagles.

While the kids were much more impressed with the model display of the mounds in the warm, dry interpretive center and the toys in the gift shop, Dan and I were amazed that people like us could stand there so close to something so old. One of the mounds dated back 2,500 years. I kept wondering how it all lasted this long. Why didn't the mounds settle and melt away like piles of dirt often do over time? How did these markers of history stay intact?

The question is answered in part by the National Parks Service. They started preserving the Effigy Mounds in 1949. According to a film we watched at the interpretive center, there were many people before that who fought for the preservation of the mounds too. It's a good thing. Because without it the mounds may have been tilled over like thousands of others in the area.

At another National Park I saw a sign posted on the wall explaining the mission of the agency. It read: "The National Park Service saves special places to preserve the memories created there. Places where people from many cultures and walks of life have lived, learned and created. We save them forever and for all." I read this at the Abraham Lincoln Home National Historic Site.

We've been lucky to have visited more than 15 lands preserved by the NPS in the past few months. Each time we are grateful that someone before us had the forethought to save it as it was or restore it. So we were able to watch a sunset behind a sand dune or watch wild horses roam in marshy water on an

island by the Atlantic or so I could stick my head out the window of the RV and smell nothing but pine trees.

We have had these wonderful opportunities, but we also took some time last month to give back to the land we love. While visiting a National Park we learned September 26 was named National Public Lands Day. Thousands of volunteer events were scheduled to celebrate the day all across the nation. With a little planning, we found one that matched up with our own itinerary. And on September 26, on the banks on the great Mississippi River, the kids and Dan and I donned our work gloves and hauled brush and trash from a beautiful little park in Lilydale, Minnesota. According to the counts I found online, we were among 150,000 volunteers in that day supporting the National Parks.

There's a familiar saying I bumped into three times in the last two weeks that I think is fitting. "In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught." I hope my kids are learning to love what I'm teaching them about the parks.

Becky Hirn is a Delphos resident traveling America with her family for a year. She documents the journey at www.ourtriptakesus.com. Follow the Hirn family in photos, blogs, on Facebook and Twitter. Or learn how to partner with the trip as an advertiser. You may e-mail Becky at beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com