

Sunday Forum: The granola factor

Writer ROBERT ISENBERG thinks Western Pennsylvania could become another Vermont -- a crunchy, popular place for residents and eco-tourists alike -- if we can re-imagine ourselves

Sunday, April 15, 2007

When I was growing up in small-town Vermont, the possibilities for adventure each weekend seemed endless: hiking or mountain-biking in the fall, kayaking in the summer, snow-shoeing or skiing in the winter. No matter the month, the Great Outdoors beckoned my family to pack up a tent, some carabiners and 50 feet of nylon rope.

People expect this of Vermont. It's the Green Mountain State. The land of Phish and maple syrup. The great winter playground. The most rural state in America.

Ever since I moved to Pittsburgh when I was 17, people would ask where I was from and then sigh with envy when I'd say Vermont. "I've always wanted to go there," they'd respond, dreaming of cabins and waterfalls and white-tailed deer.

Robert Isenberg, co-author of
The Pittsburgh Monologue
Project, is a writer, actor and
bicyclist
(robertisenberg@yahoo.com).

But there is nothing -- nothing -- in Vermont that you can't find in rural Western Pennsylvania. Sure, the mountains in Vermont are a little taller and highway billboards are outlawed, but everything else is about the same. Vermont has placid lakes, Pennsylvania has rambling rivers. Vermont has retired granite quarries, Pennsylvania has abandoned mines. Vermont has Burlington (pop. 50,000), Western Pennsylvania has Pittsburgh (pop. 330,000).

What's the difference? Attitude. A robust approach to the Great Outdoors is the only thing that keeps Western Pennsylvania from attracting hordes of enviro-tourists, just like Vermont.

Vermont embraces its foothills and forests, sometimes to the point of snobbery. Vermonters live almost competitively progressive lives, flaunting their wilderness knowledge and eco-friendly houses. Pennsylvanians (specifically Pittsburghers) seem to forget that the wilderness exists. We pretend that Pittsburgh is a sprawling megalopolis, rife with urban problems that can only be fixed with urban solutions: new arenas, more nightlife, slot machines, smoking bans, a city motto.

But the solution also should include a broader redefinition: Pittsburgh would make the perfect granola town.

Picture it: Youth hostels in the South Side and East Liberty. Rows of bike shops and gear suppliers in Oakland and Shadyside. Day-spas atop Mt. Washington. Kayak rentals up and down the Allegheny River. More micro-breweries popping up in Bloomfield and the North Side. In the past five years, condemned buildings have been transformed into galleries and theaters. Why not co-ops and rock-climbing schools, too?

If you drive a little over an hour to the southeast, you find Ohiopyle State Park, a wooded paradise of rivers, trails, hills, camping and rafting. When it rains, you can cruise into the village of Ohiopyle and order a meal at a homey local restaurant. Buy a T-shirt. Catch some fish. Ohiopyle is nearly indistinguishable from a Vermont park of similar size, except it isn't as humid and there are fewer mosquitoes.

Drive two hours to the north and you've entered the primal woods of Allegheny National Forest, a virginal kingdom of cliffs, canyons, reservoirs and mountain hikes. Care for a canoe trip? Want to sky-dive? It's all there.

In New England, you have to drive two hours to run afternoon errands; here, you can reach the state's most majestic park, offering the same recreational smorgasbord. Plus, visitors can cruise Route 6, a highway that National Geographic has dubbed "one of America's most scenic drives."

Or you can just stay in the 'Burgh. Thanks to initiatives like Bike Pittsburgh, PA CleanWays, Redd Up Pittsburgh and the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association, this city is rapidly naturalizing. Paved bike trails line the riverbanks. Polluted tributaries have been reclaimed. Abandoned structures like the Terminal Buildings and the Armstrong Cork Factory have been reincarnated as lofts and apartments.

Twenty-somethings are buying property and middle-aged businesspeople are biking to work. Nothing to do on the weekends? Spend five minutes with the staff of Venture Outdoors and you'll never be bored again: They'll arrange nature hikes, wine-and-cheese picnics, caving, cross-country skiing, you name it. If Pittsburgh can become an arts town, it also can become a granola town.

Few people realize that Vermont was once similar to Pittsburgh: Outsiders perceived it as a rustic backwater. The people sounded ignorant and the mountains had been deforested by loggers. Marble quarries had bored 40-foot trenches into the earth and many houses didn't have electricity or running water.

But when my parents moved to Vermont in the mid-1970's, they discovered a cheap, open-minded state full of friendly people and lots of local pride. Soon after, Vermont's economy exploded: Ben & Jerry's, Cabot Cheese, Bruegger's Bagels, New England Coffee, the Vermont Teddy Bear Company, Woodchuck Hard Cider and Magic Hat all began or are headquartered in Vermont, and they all have earned national or international attention over the past 30 years. Ben and Jerry were once a couple of hippies selling ice cream from their middle-of-nowhere gas station. Now their company is an international phenomenon.

The same thing could happen in Pittsburgh. We've just never seriously considered the granola demographic. Mayors build bike trails, but what if Pittsburgh became famous for its challenging, scenic rides? And its kayaking. And Chinese dragon-boat races. We already have some of the greenest architecture and highest concentrations of urban parks in the

nation. Pittsburgh already is home to Dirt Rag Magazine. Why not start telling people about it?

So you're from suburban Baltimore and can't afford to stay in Aspen this year? Stay in Pittsburgh! Seven Springs is 40 minutes away, and Aspen doesn't have the Warhol Museum.

City Council needs a motto? How about: "Pittsburgh, a drinking town with a hiking problem." Or: "Steel our forests." Or: "Yinz got gorp?"

On a practical level, the transformation isn't hard: Just finish the trails, add some bike lanes, buy a few dozen more rentable kayaks and start advertising in regional magazines. (The Adirondacks enjoy a multi-billion-dollar tourism industry because of those cheesy "I Love New York" ads). Put together a comprehensive guidebook for outdoors people. Give tax-breaks to entrepreneurs with outdoorsy business proposals. Start circulating sexy photographs of the Laurel Highlands and disc-golfing in Schenley Park. When sporty tourists show up and see that they can buy a three-story house for \$60,000, some will stay.

Granola towns adhere to the standard rules of having to supply what people demand, and Pittsburgh has some distinct advantages: Burlington and Northampton are expensive and pretentious; Pittsburgh is neither. Ithaca and North Bend don't have major international airports, but we do. Portland and Crested Butte are now overcrowded with tourists; Pittsburgh has few.

And one other thing: Outdoors initiatives are not only a source of revenue and employment, they also can improve the health and spirit of Pittsburgh's people.

Our only roadblock is existential: If we can imagine Pittsburgh as a woodsy, sporty town, it can happen. In fact, we already are pretty woodsy and sporty, we just don't see ourselves that way.

First published on April 13, 2007 at 5:29 pm