

PILGRIMAGES THIRD IN A SERIES

APPALACHIAN TRAIL MAGIC



Photos by MIKE VACEK • Special to the Star Tribune

Appalachian Trail through-hikers can spend days seeing little more than trees and dirt path. Not so at McAfee Knob, a perch in Virginia that offers a humbling view of the miles and mountains to come.

From Georgia to Maine, a legion of hikers pit themselves against the path.



The trail stood in sharp relief after snow fell on Blood Mountain in Georgia. Most through-hikers begin their quest in later winter, and can awake to ice on their tents.

By **KERRI WESTENBERG** • kwestenberg@startribune.com

In the thick woods of New Hampshire, a hiker known as Old School awoke at daybreak and lay still, listening to squirrels and songbirds chirp and trill. The leaves of maples and hemlocks stirred above; the sound grew louder and faded like a wave. Slowly, the man pulled the pants he'd been using as a pillow from under his head, coaxed them to the depths of his sleeping bag and eased his legs into them. Then he emerged from his tent into the chilly morning air, testing his body's willingness to take yet another long walk in the woods. ¶ The body consented, despite a kink in the right calf. ¶ It was late August in the White Mountains, where peaks of jagged stone have foiled fitter men. Old School — also known as Billy Mason, a 48-year-old short-order cook from Virginia Beach, Va. — had been trudging north nearly every day since March 3. On his back, he carried a 30-pound pack, which included a sleeping bag, a sleeping pad, a tent, food, a water filter, but no camp stove. He'd deemed that unnecessary weight and unloaded it somewhere in Connecticut. **G10 ▶**



Scott Wilson (at left) and Andy Snyder celebrate trail magic, beer and snickers left in a cooler by a kind stranger.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Travel looks at the nature of pilgrimage in this four-part series. Today's collection of stories explores physical challenges imbued with meaning that transcends the journeys. On Jan. 7, we'll examine heritage travel and go to the slave castles of Senegal with a writer whose family members may have passed through on the way to the New World. Part I of the series, about spiritual journeys, took us to Jerusalem. Part II, on cultural pilgrimages, followed fans to Elvis Presley's Graceland.

INSIDE

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APPALACHIAN TRAIL MAGIC



Photos by KERRI WESTENBERG • kwestenberg@startribune.com

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY Each year more than 3 million people engage with nature by walking at least a portion of the Appalachian Trail. A hiker catches the last moments of sunset at Ethan Pond in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. A campsite sits back from the water.

◀ **TRAIL FROM G1**

His 18-year-old stepson kept pace at his side. His wife had been there at the beginning, but she had returned home to tend to their younger teens. Other hikers were close at hand, too.

More than 1,000 people every year are drawn to the particular challenge that Old School had set for himself: to hike the entire Appalachian Trail, a 2,175-mile dirt path that runs up mountain peaks, across meadows and alongside streams from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Some of these through-hikers wear boots scuffed from years of wear. Others come with gleaming new equipment they barely know how to use. They are accountants, mail carriers, schoolteachers, retirees, recent college grads. But in the woods, where most take on trail names, they leave those old labels behind.

They come to strip life to the basics: up at sunrise, down at dusk, eat food, drink water. They come for the contemplative act of putting one foot in front of the other — again and again and again and again — following the white blazes painted onto trees and rocks that mark the Appalachian Trail. They come for the joy of exerting their muscles, meeting other hikers, merging with nature. Primarily, they come to see if they're up to the task.

Old School had his own reason.

In the so-called real world, Mason doesn't hike. Flatlands surround Virginia Beach, where he flips pancakes at an IHOP. Seeking out mountains is not his idea of fun.

But in 1996, a car crash left him in serious condition. "My right leg was smashed up real good," he said. Doctors warned he might lose it. As Mason lay in bed after one of four operations that saved his limb, he saw a TV show about the Appalachian Trail. It was the first he'd heard of through-hikers.

"I said, 'Lord, let me get well enough, and I'll hike the whole thing.'"

Ten years later in New Hampshire, Old School worked on fulfilling that

promise. He tallied up his miles: 430 to go.

"It took so much effort to leave the real world," he said. "It disrupted so many people's lives. We put everything in storage, enrolled our kids in a different school, put bills on automatic payment. I can't go home and say my feet hurt."

That Americans romanticize life in the woods and revere the tenacity of those who try it comes as no surprise since pioneers and naturalists populate our collective psyche. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Daniel Boone, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Laura Ingalls Wilder: They all speak to the power of the American landscape and its ability to transform lives.

Devotees of the Appalachian Trail would add to their ranks another great thinker, Benton MacKaye.

MacKaye was an undistinguished public servant working for the Labor Department in 1921 when he published an article in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects proposing an ambitious undertaking: the building of a footpath that would scale Appalachian peaks from New England to the South.

At the time, mountain clubs already maintained hiking trails in New England, but none had thought to tame the tangled wilderness that covered much of the mountainous South. Still, the idea slowly gained traction.

In 1925, MacKaye brought together Forest Service and hiking club leaders in Washington, D.C., and formed the Appalachian Trail Conference. The group mapped a 1,200-mile course from North Carolina to New Hampshire.

By the time the trail was completed in 1937, with the help of volunteers and the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps, the route had changed and grown significantly.

No one believed the pathway could be covered in one push; the trail founders considered that beside the point, anyway. Then in 1948, Earl Shaffer, who had recently served in the Army, achieved it, hiking from April through August. Out among the trees,



STOCKING UP While waiting for breakfast at a diner in Hanover, N.H., Billy Mason, aka Old School, opens a box of supplies he had retrieved at the post office.

following a sometimes poorly marked trail, Shaffer had been utterly alone.

Every year now as winter wanes, more than 1,000 people head to Springer Mountain to attempt the same feat. While those who end their hike at Katahdin number in the low hundreds, solitude often eludes through-hikers.

At the start, they move up the trail more or less en masse before the crowd thins as some drop out. Those who persevere repeatedly encounter one another as they move up the trail in fits and starts. Inevitably, friendships form, usually at campsites and shelters over dinner. Hikers leave missives for one another in notebooks at shelters, make plans to hook up at key junctures, help each other out and, in the process, form tremendous bonds.

"Hey, Dinosaur, how much further you going today?" Chris Johnson (aka Mr. Parkay) asked when Kathryn Herndon came bounding down a steep path. Herndon, a 23-year-old North Carolinian, wore a bandana like a crown, her spiky hair poking up from the center. Margaret Worthington (aka a Hellbender), Herndon's friend since junior high, strode along behind.

"Not far. We heard there's an ice cream shop half a mile down the road," Herndon said.

The trio stopped by a boulder with a tree sprouting from a crack. Overhanging branches screened out the hot sun, but the air was warm. Ice cream, an elusive favorite among hikers, sounded good.

They decided to get cones, then set up camp together farther along on the trail. They'd been running across each other for months now.

"The reason you stay on the trail is more important than why you start," Herndon said. "I'm here for the lifestyle, the people, the community feeling."

That roving community has developed its own distinct culture.

Through-hikers use their own lingo: "NoBos," or Northbounders, start in Georgia and end in Maine; "Sobos" do the opposite; "flip-floppers" complete the trail in one trip using an atypical itinerary, perhaps heading to Katahdin from West Virginia and returning there to hike the southern stretch. "Blue-blazers" think nothing of taking a shortcut on an alternative trail (marked by blue blazes), a blasphemous act to "purists."

Most take on a trail name. They'll tell you that something like "Dinosaur" is easier to remember than Kathryn Herndon. But it's more than that. A trail name — which hikers can bestow on themselves or wait until other hikers do so — marks a change:

An old life has been temporarily set aside for a new one on the trail.

Through-hikers have their own lore, too, in the form of "trail magic," acts of unexpected goodwill. A cooler filled with drinks and candy tucked alongside the trail is typical. Lucky through-hikers get grander gifts.

Jeffrey Chow, a 23-year-old flip-flopper who goes by the trail name Balance and Peace, was looking for a ride back to the trail from a Kmart in western Massachusetts. A couple offered him significantly more: Would he like dinner and a bed to sleep in?

He did. Chow suffers from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and he had been dragging. That night, he ate every bite of dinner. He played with the baby. He watched the World Cup. He slept under a roof, long and hard.

The following morning, the couple invited him to Boston. This time, he hesitated.

Underpinning every through-hike is a drive to keep moving; Chow felt it keenly. Still, he opted for the side trip. "We had the best time," he told me back on the trail as he collected water from a trickling stream.

He has no regrets, and his self-selected trail name helps explain why. "Balance and Peace, that's my personal search out here," Chow said. "Balancing my health with working hard and making miles. Balancing the struggle of being out here with the joys of being out here ... and peace: I hope to find peace that if I'm not doing the miles, it's OK. I don't have to be so hard on myself."

The unexpected assistance of strangers, the scent of balsam fir, the roar of a waterfall, freedom from workaday obligations, deep slumber: That's an abbreviated list of things that hikers savor. Another list, this one of things they must endure: blisters, parched lips, sleeping near strangers, black flies, fear of steep falls, hot sun, cold rain, freeze-dried food, the odor of their own exertion mingled with dirt. It was a pungent, earthy scent I grew accustomed to, first from other hikers and then, after four days in the woods, myself.

Hiking the Appalachian Trail is not the walk in the national park that some people imagine. With a 40-pound pack on my back, I had a hard time getting up from the ground, let alone up a mountain. I met muscles I never knew existed. The going was slow. I spent three hours hiking uphill three miles on my first day out. After weeks on the trail, many hikers can do more than 20 miles in a day. Moving forward becomes their single focus.

"It is crazy hard," Old School told me in New Hampshire, hanging his head. You get to camp, do your camp chores, and you're too tired for much else.

"When this is all over," he said, "I won't remember how hard it was getting up the mountain. I'll remember the view from the top."

Weeks later, on Sept. 28, Old School made one of the physically toughest climbs of his months on the trail: He scaled the craggy backbone of Katahdin. His stepson and wife, who'd rejoined them for the occasion, made the ascent with him.

At the top, mist set in. When Old School looked outward, he saw a gray void instead of a mountaintop view. It didn't matter. He looked deep inside instead. He had achieved a monumental goal, and that fact was as solid as the earth beneath his feet.

"Climbing up was real quiet. We got to the top and it was like, wow, it's over. I couldn't believe it; it had always seemed so far away."

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