



# Finding Angels

(Puffin's Hike)

Section hiking  
the Appalachian Trail

This project emerged from examining how long-distance hiking has changed my life, certainly for the better, over the last 10+ years. In 2021, when I began writing this, I was only seven years into the endeavor. I had hiked nearly half of the almost 2,200 miles on the Appalachian Trail. I would be more precise about the actual distance, but it changes every year as the trail is re-routed along the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains. That's one of the curious things about section hiking the trail. Hiking in sections instead of thru-hiking the trail in one year makes every excursion different and special in its own way. This narrative is about how each section is special and about the remarkable people that are found along the trail.

This is also a reflection on how transitions in life happen. Hopefully, it can help guide making those transitions in a positive direction.

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Cover photo: Upper Goose Pond with “Wildcat”

**Author's Note:** Hiking on the Appalachian Trail takes you away from our world into another. Life is simpler and everyone, no matter how different they are, shares the same goal: hiking miles. This leads to a closely knit community; belonging to that community reestablishes your faith in mankind. Today, now more than ever, that faith is priceless.

The trail also has its own language. Colloquialisms are common, but are easy to learn. For your reference, a glossary follows the text with definitions of many AT hiker terms. These terms are *italicized* in the text.

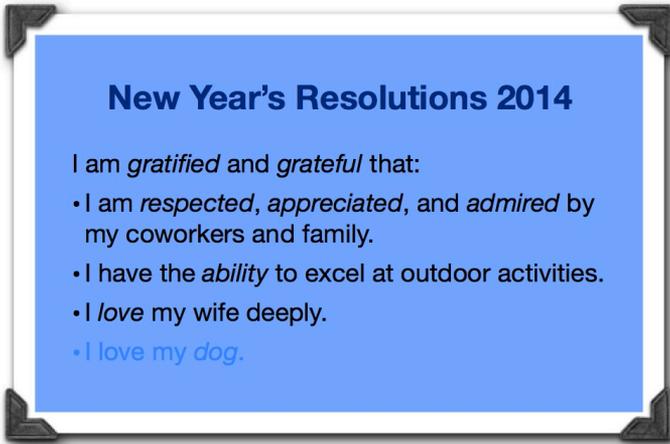
Everyone has a trail name. You can pick your own, but if you don't, someone will pick it for you and it could be "Weenie." My trail name is "Puffin", which I chose for a myriad of reasons. My mother, who died of breast cancer when I was in medical school, was nicknamed "Puff." As a toddler she would huff and puff up the stairs. She loved penguins and sailboats. She drove to art shows with her watercolor paintings of sailboats and barns in an orange Ford Pinto station wagon with faux wood panels, that iconic vehicle of the 70's. "Puffin" was a natural choice for me, especially since I huff and puff up the countless mountain climbs on the Appalachian Trail.

*"Forget your personal tragedy. We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt, use it - don't cheat with it."*

— Ernest Hemingway



# 1. SCOUT



Puffin's 2014 Resolutions Card

I knew was that I was unhappy and had been that way since before I could remember. I was approaching 60 years old and with retirement around the corner, it was time to reexamine my life and get things right. Why I felt unhappy was starting to become clear, thanks to an amazing therapist. My intention was to use my resolutions to guide me further onto the path of happiness.

I made a list. I felt that I was treated with contempt and disrespect at work and at home in an unhappy marriage. I didn't allow myself to partake in the outdoor activities that I loved so much. The first of these was sailing. I have raced sailboats my whole life and had even contemplated becoming a professional while on the sailing team at the Naval Academy. But that was before changing paths to pursue entrance into medical school and a career as a

physician. My second love was backpacking. It had been quite some time since I had been on the trail, but I had hiked on the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania while growing up near D.C. (Four states may seem like a lot, but it's only a little more than 40 miles of trail.) It was time to start backpacking again. A dog would come later.

I became preoccupied with getting outdoors. The Internet was a useful tool for research. Backpacker web sites and YouTube videos are abundant and provide much of what one needs to know. New technologies have evolved over the last few decades that have made enormous leaps forward for those setting off into the wilderness. Lightweight and strong materials for packs, tents and other items are now widely available. This includes ultra-strong and lightweight ropes. I relished the thought of using these materials that have their origins on high tech sailboats. They were all familiar to me and knotting or splicing these ropes was a skill I mastered many years ago.

I made a trip to my local REI and bought a lot of equipment. However, for my sleep/shelter system, I opted for a hammock/tarp setup from an on-line retailer. Cottage industry sites are the go-to places for equipment for ultra-light backpackers. I hadn't learned much about ultra-light hiking yet, I only sought a comfortable night's sleep in the backcountry. I got that and hiked over a thousand miles with a Warbonnet hammock. [WarbonnetOutdoors.com](http://WarbonnetOutdoors.com)



A March rain gave way to a cloud patched sky, leaving behind moisture in the air. The garage was dark and damp. A ray of light shone through the window onto the asphalt floor at my feet. But all was blurry, the tears welling up in my eyes made it hard to focus.

I don't recall what made me so despondent and ready to give up on it all. But as I sat on an overturned five-gallon bucket, head in hands, all I could do was sob uncontrollably.

I have always been proud of my skills with ropes and knots. I used those skills to fashion a well tied noose from a spare piece of rope thrown over a beam in the garage ceiling.

After several hours, the darkness cleared. I had a family with two small children and a career as a physician, so checking out at 32 wasn't an option.

It would take a lifetime to figure out what got me to that point. It's much more clear now.



It's more than a 12 hour drive from St Louis to northern Minnesota. Hiking on the Superior Hiking Trail, which follows the northwest shore of the lake for 300 miles, seemed like a great place to tryout my gear in the heat of summer. My home state, Missouri, is full of ticks and is hot as hades in August. This was to be my shake-down hike.

I arrived at [Naniboujou Lodge](#) on the shore of Lake Superior and spent the night before setting off on the SHT. I also dropped off my vehicle 24 miles south at my final destination, the Pincushion Mountain trailhead, which I

intended to hike to over 3 days and 2 nights. The lodge is a landmark building that once housed a famous 1920s gentlemen's club. It is adjacent to the Brule River and Judge C.R. Magney State Park. This was the first of many off-trail accommodations where I would spend the night while hiking. The hotel had enormous history and charm; the restaurant is it's crown jewel. The walls and ceiling are a palette of color in Cree Indian motif. A titanic stone fireplace made of native Lake Superior stone sits at one end. The menu featured a delectable walleye plate and apple crisp for dessert.



Naniboujou Lodge

In the morning, **Day #1**, I set out across the street from the lodge to the state park. Here, the trail goes straight up to the top of the ridge along the river before heading south along the ridge above Lake Superior. The climb was slow as the humidity was approaching 90% in the relatively cool

morning air. Being cold and sweating at the same time is one of those special feelings that backpacking offers. To make things worse, my pack weighed well over 35 pounds. I had purchased a double layer heavyweight hammock and had my 65 liter Osprey pack full of all sorts of “essential” hiking gear. This included: an aluminum pot with frying pan, cooking utensils, water filter pump, Nalgene bottle, bear canister, comprehensive first aid kit, bathroom kit, several changes of clothes, a saw, extra food, several flashlights with extra batteries, a ukulele and a large Garmin GPS, just to get started. I think every hiker starts out this way but learns to reduce pack weight very quickly.

South of the state park, the SHT descends from the ridge every few miles to trailheads along Minnesota Rte 61 on the lake shore. So that’s how my first day went. Up to the ridge and down to the road, although there was a section that went along the shore. And oh, what a lake! Fresh cool air blew in off it’s surface. One-hundred and eighty degrees of horizon with an open expanse of water and ocean sized waves along with a beach that would rival any in the Baltic or Mediterranean. I never dreamed that an inland sea existed in our country.

I stopped for lunch at a stream crossing and filtered some foamy brown water. In northern Minnesota iron ore is dissolved in the water; the Edmund Fitzgerald was loaded with the stuff when it went down. But that brown water tastes superb when it’s cold you’re thirsty. I ate my lunch sitting on the bridge. The melodic roll of the stream as it cascaded down the mountain and a fresh clear lake shore breeze made the break delightful. As I ate my lunch, a scraggly bearded hiker made his way up the trail and joined

me. “Scout” was his trail name. Scout had thru-hiked the AT in 2013 and was now hiking the entire 300 miles on the SHT. He showed me his pack, which was well under 20 pounds and he bragged that he used Clorox to purify his water, “Just a few drops and you’re good to go.” That seemed kinda crazy to me, but that encounter would fundamentally change my approach to gear and particularly to water purification. He gave me my first “nudge” on the way to becoming a happier and more proficient hiker. *Ultralight* was in my future.

To my surprise, I covered 12 miles that day and stopped at one of the campsites along the SHT for the night. Trees were abundant and setting up my hammock and tarp for the first time was easy. For dinner, I fixed my favorite trail meal, fried spam with macaroni and cheese. What, really, you ask? Just think about it. You’re starved for nutrition and you prepare a hot meal with pure protein, fat, and carbohydrates infused with the flavor of cheese. Yummy! I remember eating this meal in January on the Appalachian Trail while in college. It was just as good, if not better, then.

That first night on the trail was memorable. There were no wildlife encounters, but it was really dark. In fact, I have never seen it so dark, before or after that time. There was a new moon, cloud cover and no light pollution. When I woke in the middle of the night, there was complete blackness. I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face. My headlamp only provided a single beam of light to pierce the darkness until the sun rose in the morning.

I eventually woke and rolled out of my hammock after a wonderful night's sleep. A trip to the privy, which was really more of a fiberglass toilet seat placed over a hole in the ground, was followed by cooked dehydrated eggs and boiled coffee for breakfast. The eggs made such a mess that I haven't cooked them since. Breakfast is now almost always instant oatmeal and hot chocolate with a packet of instant coffee, with rare exceptions, usually Pop Tarts.

**Day #2** was more of up to the top of the ridge and down to the road. I did find myself doing a road walk along the way, skipping one trip up to the ridge. This would turn out to be a continuing theme for me. I enjoy navigating and figuring out short-cuts; it's a challenge that I eagerly take on. Purists may shame me for this, but I offer no apologies, I'm "hiking my own hike" and do create a continuous footpath from start to finish. There's an important lesson here. Long distance hiking is about setting your own rules and having your own experience.

After a lunch of tuna salad wrapped in a tortilla, the day finished with a hike around the Devil's Track River. This area is one of the most magnificent areas I have seen. The vistas are awe-inspiring as the trail follows bluffs around the river until its crossing, then descends back towards Lake Superior. Shortly thereafter, the trail reached the Pincushion Mountain trailhead, where I had parked my car. I had completed another 12 mile day!

I drove into Grand Marais, a quaint lakeside town with a sheltered harbor, to find an ice cream shop before heading home. The trip was huge success. My mileage was greater than expected and although heavy, my gear had functioned

nearly flawlessly. I was out of the blocks on an adventure that would last for years.

DRAFT

## 2. Broken Feather



Mountain Hardware Thruway 50

Winter was spent doing more research and acquiring another round of backpacking gear. Hikers usually talk about the big three: backpack, sleep system and shelter. I rethought all of these. I ditched the Osprey pack and switched to a frameless pack. Scarcely any hikers use the Mountain Hardware Thruway 50, but it served me extremely well in 2015. I switched to a lighter version of the Warbonnet hammock and purchased a 40 degree down quilt. There were many other equipment changes. The *base weight* of my pack was down below 14 lbs and I was delighted!

Spring was spent doing practice hikes around St Louis. Most of these were 7-10 miles with a full pack. My hiking shoes got broken in and my pack became more comfortable.

One more thing, I had cancer. Actually it was two cancers. I don't want to focus on these, people tend to have exaggerated responses. I was blessed to have access to top-notch medical care and sailed through treatment with minimal complications. When I finished treatment I had increased resolve to pursuing a new direction in my life.

“The Journey Begins...” That was the opening of my first AT blog post on June 27th, 2015. I had arranged to be off work for more than two months and planned to hike over 1,000 miles from Harper's Ferry, WV to Springer Mountain, GA. I had mapped out an itinerary for the entire journey, with resupply stops and daily miles averaging more than 15 miles a day. My plans would soon be thrown by the wayside.

My step sister and her family live in Leesburg, VA, less than 20 miles from the AT, and that's where I began. I started hiking with Jeff, my brother-in-law. My first steps on the AT were in the rain. It was not just a trickle, but a downpour that continued all day! Feeling like drowned rats, Jeff and I hiked NOBO (northbound) from Bears Den to the Blackburn Trail Center along a washed out trail. It was like hiking in a river. We *slack-packed* 8 miles and met 6 NOBO thru-hikers. Returning to a warm dry bed in Leesburg that evening was delightful.



Going to medical school requires sacrifice, more so 50 years ago than today. The benefit from that sacrifice can be debated, but there is no question that it made me a better physician and probably a better person too. Then again,

after slogging through plebe year at the Naval Academy, the long hours and demands of medical school were a piece of cake. The biggest sacrifice was rarely seeing my children. To this day, I don't recall what my daughter was like at the age of one, other than that her first word was, "No!". The other big sacrifice was being away from sailing. I hadn't raced for 6 years when I finished my training and moved to St Louis. Sailboat racing in the midwest? I searched and found a sailing club in Illinois on a large lake about an hour east of my new home.

One Sunday morning I made the drive to Carlyle Sailing Association; the first of many to this day. After convincing a skipper, who needed a third on his boat, that I knew my way around a racing dinghy, he let me take the helm for the day's races. I was exhilarated to be back on the water and winning races again. Augie, the skipper, a young woman named Lois, the crew, and I had an amazing time rounding the buoys on that spectacular day. Thank God that there was quality racing near my new home in the midwest. I had been given a reprieve. This day was so special in so many ways. I only wish I could have appreciated all of them at the time. However, now I can.



The ATC (Appalachian Trail Conservancy) oversees trail management from Maine to Georgia and is headquartered in Harper's Ferry, WV. It partners with the National Park Service, Forest Service and the 31 trail clubs that maintain the AT. It keeps statistics on the trail as well as lists of successful thru-hikers each year. Most thru-hikers stop at ATC headquarters to browse, have their picture taken and

sign their log book. Located at the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, Harpers Ferry is the defacto psychological mid-point of the Appalachian Trail.

**Day #2** started from ATC headquarters SOBO (southbound) and without Jeff, who was not ready for another day like the first. The weather turned out to be much better and the 12 mile hike, again to Blackburn Trail Center was pure joy. After the steep hike up to the top of the ridge, there was minimal elevation change and the trail was well groomed. I met many thru-hikers from the prior day, a Boy Scout troop and came across my first trail magic. Trail magic is special. Typically, former thru-hikers set up food stations at trailheads or road crossings. At Keys Gap the trail magic was burgers, hot dogs, soda and chips. There would be many times in the future that I would encounter trail magic, each one special.

On **Day #3** I threw myself onto the roller coaster with a full pack. The roller coaster is a 13 mile section that has 10 seemingly needless ascents and descents between 400 and 1200 feet. The right of way for the trail is very narrow through this section, necessitating a pathway up and down almost every summit. However, my personal opinion is that the original trail blazers were just heartless bastards. There is a sign posted at the southern end of the roller coaster that reads:

*“Hiker Notice. Warning!! You are about to enter THE ROLLER COASTER!! Built and maintained by the “Trailboss” and his merry crew of volunteers. Have a great ride and we will see you at the Blackburn Trail Center. (If you survive)”*

Up, down, rehydrate, rest and repeat; that was my day. The rain had completely cleared and the temperature was rising. The first water source was a small stream that crossed the trail. I filled my water bottle and purified it. Most thru-hikers use a water filter, the Sawyer Squeeze was the preferred model at the time, but I opted to chemically purify my water. Aquamira drops are light weight and purify by using chlorine dioxide to sterilize the water. The result is protozoa, bacteria and virus free water with a clean crisp taste. It does, however take 20 minutes. Filters are way faster, but in my opinion there is nothing that tastes better than mountain spring water purified with Aqua Mira.

A NOBO thru-hiker dressed in a broad brim Tilley hat, peach colored button down shirt and a kilt walked by while I was processing water, offering salutations. He was “Peaches.” I thought the look was trendy, but I still haven’t gotten the courage to wear a kilt. Although they sure do look comfortable!

After exiting the roller coaster, I stopped at Rod Hollow shelter to set up my first camp for the night. Thanks to the recent rain, the water source was flowing nicely. There were lots of other hikers there too, including “Dirty Peaches”, who unquestionably was from Atlanta. She was the first of many fearless



Peaches

solo women I would meet hiking the AT.

Dicks Dome, my next destination, was an old geodesic type shelter that had seen much better days. In fact, it was replaced in 2016 with Whiskey Hollow shelter, which was under construction when I was there. A beautiful stream runs right next to the shelter and I set up my hammock along the bank. Two other hikers were there, a brave soul in the shelter and another in a tent. The latter was Marathon, who was my companion for the evening. Marathon was a runner and section hiker from Louisville, KY. It was fantastic to have the company and trail fellowship. I fell asleep to the sounds of the water flowing over rocks and woke in the morning after what may have been the best nights sleep I have had on the AT. In fact, Marathon asked me in the morning what I thought of the horrific thunderstorm that rolled through during the night. I replied, “what storm?”

I was reenergized after sleeping next to the stream and hiked strong leaving Dick’s Dome. I crossed railroad tracks and my first interstate (I-66), of which there would be many more. I ate wild blackberries and stopped to rest at the Jim and Molly Denton shelter, which was an awesome place. There was even a lawn and a covered picnic table!

After getting to Route 522, I called for a ride into Front Royal. I visited the post office to pick up my supply box and checked into a shabby motel, although by hiker standards, it was as fancy as the Four Seasons. I ate at the local Thai restaurant, did laundry and got a hot shower before falling into bed. A trip to the grocery for resupply would be my final stop before leaving the next morning.

On **Day #6** I entered Shenandoah National Park. I hiked along a fence that was covered in raspberry bushes, loaded with fresh plump and succulent berries. The berries were at their peak and I would be snacking on them for most of my trip through Shenandoah; timed that right! As I hiked up the trail, I noticed a paw print in the mud. It was large and claw marks radiated from the print; a bear had recently been here. Shenandoah has many black bears and they were out eating berries too. I had developed a somewhat irrational fear of bears while I was preparing for my hike. Black bears are simply motivated by one thing: food. Handling and storing food properly and having respect for a bear's space is usually all that is needed. But I had heard too many stories of hikers mauled by bears. Usually, there was a picture of the bear on their phone when they were found. In addition to taking care of my food, I wasn't going to be taking any pictures of bears.



Bear Paw Print

Just inside the park boundary there was a backcountry permit station. There's no cost for AT hikers to travel through Shenandoah, but self-registering and obtaining a permit is required. To my dismay, when I opened the permit box it was empty. I did find a used permit in the drop box, which I managed to erase and complete with my own information. It's a good thing I did, because a park ranger checked my permit a few days later; resourcefulness paid off.

The short hike into the park qualified as a *nero*. This hiker term applies to a day's hike that is near zero miles; a *zero* is a complete rest day. Soon after I entered the park, I exited to Terrapin Station Hostel. This was my first stay at a hostel and I quickly learned why hikers love them so much. For a small fee, I got a bed in the bunk room, a hot shower, laundry and access to a freezer stocked with frozen pizza, soda and ice cream. I spent the evening with "Pick-Me-Up." He had recently graduated from Colorado School of Mines and was taking time off to thru-hike the AT. His joyful company was true to his trail name. We sat in the common room watching television and chatted for most of the evening. I had also met another NOBO thru-hiker earlier that day. The "Gentleman" was from Boston and was also true to his name. Both hikers sported full beards and short haircuts. Shaving in the backcountry was impractical, in addition, a short haircut was sensible.

**Day #7** was my first full day in Shenandoah. Skyline Drive runs through the park and parallels the AT for the entire 105 miles between Front Royal and Waynesboro. Hiking in Shenandoah consists of hiking up a mountain, down a mountain, crossing Skyline Drive and then repeating the

process, which is not all that different from hiking the SHT. The trail is maintained by the National Park Service, so it's well graded and groomed. There are also waysides. These are rest stops for tourists driving through the park. Each one has a grill or restaurant along with a gift shop. Hikers love them too, but just for the food.

I climbed Compton Peak, North Marshall and South Marshall during the day. I found myself singing as I hiked; a hiking song from Boy Scouts and "Shenandoah". Perhaps something else would have been more trendy, but you gotta go with your heart. My mind was starting to become free of the shackles of present-day life.

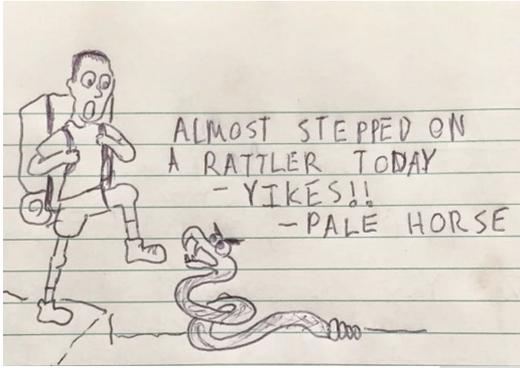
Then I needed to use the bathroom. I had managed to use privies at shelters up to this point in my hike, but the time had come to make like a bear and... Leave-no-trace etiquette dictates that business is done at least 200 ft from the trail and that everything should be buried in a *cat hole* at least 6" deep. So, I set my pack down, grabbed my toilet kit and walked off trail. I found a large downed tree, dug a hole behind it and successfully completed the mission. When I stood up and looked around, the trail was nowhere to be seen, oh damn! My pack with my cellphone, compass and everything else I used to survive in the woods, was on the ground next to a trail I could not locate. Worse yet, I knew that a thru-hiker, "Inchworm," had wandered off trail in Maine the previous year, never to be seen alive again. After wandering in the general direction of the trail for about 10 minutes I found the path. Then I had to figure out if I needed to go NOBO or SOBO to find my pack. I guessed correctly, soon found my pack and learned a valuable lesson.

In the afternoon it started to rain. There's a saying amongst AT thru-hikers that goes, "No rain, no pain, no Maine." So, I broke out my ultralight umbrella and hiked on. Besides, rain meant the water sources would be flowing. I arrived at Gravel Springs Hut well before dark and decided to try out sleeping in the shelter to stay out of the rain. After dinner, I set out my sleeping pad on the upper floor and laid down to sleep in the communal space. Four or five other hikers were there, and I soon learned why hikers carry ear plugs. Being a side sleeper, which keeps me from snoring (not others), was also painfully uncomfortable on the hard wood floor, in spite of the sleeping pad. And then, when I needed to take a bathroom break in the middle of the night, I had to use the dim red light on my headlamp to guide me as I climbed down from the upper floor. Needless to say, it was not the best nights sleep.

**Day #8** was a holiday, in every sense of the word. Even though I felt like quitting after sleeping in the shelter, I hiked strong that day. It was also the 4th of July. I was averaging more than 10 miles a day, which being less than my goal, still meant that I was putting one foot in front of the other and moving forward every day.

The biggest news was that I had a hiking partner. Pale Horse was a 6'4" 130lb 20 year old from central Pennsylvania, who was hiking SOBO to Asheville, NC to visit his brother. He was essentially homeless with almost no resources. But, his youthful and positive attitude served him well. I would see him on and off for the next 200 miles. When I first met him, he told me that he had almost

stepped on a rattlesnake. I found his description of the encounter in the trail log.



Summits that day included Hogback and Little Hogback mountain, as well as Sugarloaf and Pass Mountains. I also came across my first wayside. Elkwallow Wayside was packed with tourists and the grill was open. I bought a burger, fries and soda for lunch that really hit the spot. Pale Horse befriended a tourist family that had stopped for lunch. He entertained them with hiker tales as he dined on a lunch that they had gladly provided in return.

I spent the night at Pass Mountain Hut. This shelter had great tenting space around it and I found an excellent open spot for my hammock near the small stream. I ate dinner with two thru-hikers. Prana was a yoga instructor from Upstate New York, and she was ruminating about her recent bear encounter. A bear had stolen her food bag from the vestibule of her tent at the Big Meadows campground. She also showed me some yoga. The other was a veteran of the trail. I expressed my frustration that I was only averaging 10 miles a day so far. He told me, "Your goal

for the first two weeks should be just to not to get injured.” I took that to heart and was much happier about what I had accomplished from that point on. I would also later be told by Miss Janet, the queen mother of all trail angels, that 8 miles a day is a more realistic goal for the beginning of a thru-hike.

Sleep that night was uninterrupted and pure bliss. Shenandoah and the AT had been my home for more than a week, and it felt marvelous.

My original intent on **Day #9** was to hike 15 miles. However, the peaks were tall and I was sucked into the *vortex* at Skyland. There were three big peaks in the almost 11 miles: Mary’s Rock (3,347’), The Pinnacle (3,601’), and Stony Man (4,011’).

I hiked up Mary’s Rock to the summit, which is known for amazing views, but it was fogged in. I did however, meet a day hiker who recognized the sailing logo on my shirt. Matt, it turned out, was from Annapolis and worked for a sailing outfitter that I frequently used. I had talked with him several times on the phone while ordering sailing supplies; small world?

The Pinnacle offered views that continued to improve as the day progressed and the fog cleared. On my way to Stony Man I met several other thru-hikers including Juke Box. He sported a pack that weighed only 7 lbs and a water bottle, that’s all. Juke Box was the most ultralight hiker I’ve ever met on the AT. Packing that light would be hard for me, but a pack that light makes it easier to hike far and fast.

When I arrived at Skyland, I was able to rent a cabin for a reasonable rate. I couldn't resist a bed, shower and a days rest, so I rented the cabin for two nights.

It was sunny and warm; the views from Skyland down into the Shenandoah Valley were spectacular. I didn't do laundry and only did a very small resupply, since there were so many opportunities to eat along Skyline Drive. I spent the day sitting on the lawn reading and relaxing. I dined at the Skyland restaurant that evening. The meal was topped off with their specialty, blackberry cobbler.



Blackberry Cobbler

**Day #11:** It was less than 10 miles from Skyland to Big Meadows. A large campground, lodge, cabins and a wayside are located there. The trail goes around several mountains, instead of over them, so I covered the distance quickly. Coming off a days rest and knowing that a wayside meal was coming helped too.

I hiked through the campground to the wayside and left my pack outside. It was a popular place with hikers. I sat



Packs Outside Big Meadows Wayside

down for an early afternoon meal in the restaurant. The waitress, taking one look at me, pegged me for a hiker and asked, “You’d like the fried chicken and a blackberry milkshake?” There was no need to even ask for a menu. My reply was simple, “Of course!” The room was full of other hikers eating the same fare.

The day was still early, so I hiked on with a full stomach. As evening approached, there was no shelter nearby. It was time to *stealth camp*, i.e. camp at a spot not officially designated as a campsite. This is permissible at most, but not all locations on the AT. Backcountry ethics dictates that hikers follow “Leave No Trace” principles, minimizing impact on the trail. I found an open spot that had been utilized before, set up camp after a light meal and hung my food bag. I was at the 3800’ summit of Hazeltop, which offered a fabulous view to the west. I watched a beautiful sunset over the Shenandoah Valley before going to bed. I fell asleep thrilled that I had now hiked over 100 miles.

I woke on **Day #12** in wind and rain. I have since learned that camping on a summit or on a ridge invites this relatively disagreeable situation. My hammock/tarp

system, which performed very well in rain, does equally poorly in wind. (I have added doors to my tarp to make this better.) Fortunately, I only planned a short hike, a *nero*, that day. My son, Andrew, was coming to hike with me for a few days. Adam, his brother-in-law, lives in Charlottesville, VA and was going to pick him up and take him to meet me at Lewis Mountain Campground.

The hike from Hazeltop to Lewis Mountain was about 4 miles and mostly downhill, except for the solitary climb over Bearfence Mountain. There was an alternative trail over the summit called the “Rock Scramble,” which I elected to forgo. (Perhaps the more adventurous go that way.) The weather cleared and I hiked on through the “green tunnel.” Many hikers refer to the AT this way. For the overwhelming majority of the time hiking ton the AT,

trees are overhead and you are in the shade. This makes sunscreen less import, although I do carry a small tube. (Melanoma had been on of my cancers.) The absence of direct sunlight also makes solar chargers completely ineffective.



The Green Tunnel

When I arrived at the campground I was ecstatic to find that cabins were available to rent. Wow, I was going to get a shower and another night in a bed!

**Day #13** was spent with spectacular company. Andrew's an amazing person with a love of life that is unrivaled. He also loves to sing. Instead of singing my lame hiker songs as we rambled along the trail, we belted out an anthology of barbershop melodies in 2-part harmony.

For the first part of the day, the trail meandered up and down hills paralleling Skyline Drive. We stopped for lunch at a picnic area. There I met my first *tramily*. As large numbers of thru-hikers start NOBO in the early spring, they sort out into groups of like-minded individuals who hike at a similar pace. They will spend several months hiking together as they progress towards Mt Katahdin. Needless to say, these are closely knit groups. We ate lunch with Bronco, Lucky, Pine Cone and Luna.

After crossing through Swift Run Gap, where Route 33 crosses Skyline Drive, we climbed Hightop Mountain. This was our only significant climb for the day, but after already hiking 8 miles, the 1,200 ft ascent was a considerable workout. At the summit we were rewarded with sensational vistas to the west. We also met another thru-hiker sitting on the overlook. "Disconnect" was a software engineer from Atlanta, GA who had become disenchanted with his career and was hiking the trail to find new meaning in his life. He was also stoned out of his mind. I was surprised with his state of mind, actually lack thereof. To be honest, I thought there was absolutely no way he would ever be a successful thru-hiker. I would find out otherwise when I met him again in New England.

Hightop Hut is only 0.6 miles south of the summit, but almost 400' lower. Andrew and I arrived in the afternoon,

with plenty of time to set up camp, cook and socialize with the many thru-hikers that were at the shelter. Andrew had been told by one of the thru-hikers that he needed a trail name. The decision was made that “Barbershop” would be best, so a trail name was conceived. Pale Horse was there along with several trail veterans who were reminiscing about the days when they had thru-hiked the AT.

I also met Broken Feather. He would become a good friend that I would see on and off hiking another 200 miles SOBO through Virginia. He was a social worker from North Carolina who had just become separated from his wife. He also had a small child and was struggling with his future.

Listening to him was relevant and insightful. He and I were both using the trail to give us time to evaluate our lives and to determine if we were going to stay in our marriages. We also talked about gear. He used a gravity filter for water purification, that although relatively heavy, it made this trail chore easy. I took his picture filtering water and would use the image later for lectures.



Broken Feather demos his water filter

Barbershop and I set up hammocks close to the shelter. He chose a great spot, I did not. I’m not sure what possessed me to tie off my hammock to a double trunked tree, but I

found out very quickly that the two trunks rubbed together as the trees swayed in the the wind. The vibration from the trunks rubbing was transmitted directly to the hammock, which became an intermittent vibrating bed. Needless to say, I moved before I was able to fall asleep.



Barbershop

I promised Barbershop that **Day #14** would be easier. We planned to hike less than 10 miles to an overlook where Adam would pick us up and take us to Charlottesville for the night. We went around Roundtop, meandered over unnamed hills and crossed Skyline Drive for most of the hike. Our only summit was Weaver Mountain, which has less than 3,000 ft. Most of the day was spent hiking, singing and meeting other thru-hikers.

We also met a couple hiking with their dog, Star. I've met many dogs on trail; they are less well adapted to long distance hiking than humans. Hiking with a dog means being tuned into their needs and accommodating them. Star was by far the happiest and most energetic dog I have met on trail. Her family had gotten sponsorship from a backpacking dog

food company and made sure that all of her needs were met.

When we rolled into Ivy Creek Overlook, Adam was there to meet us. The evening would be spent doing laundry and as a chowhound at Outback Steak House in good company. My brief hike with Barbershop was at it's end.



Star

The next day, I had my first bear encounter. I was warned at a road crossing that a mama bear and two cubs were foraging next to the trail that lay ahead. They weren't reported to be aggressive or acting unfavorably in any way, so I hiked on with my bear radar in scan mode. Sure enough, they were only a short distance ahead and about 50 yards off the trail grazing for fresh berries. "Ah, how cute," I thought. "I should take a picture. They appear peaceful and happy." I stopped hiking, turned towards the bears and raised my phone for a snapshot. Mama bear was not happy! She raised up on her hind legs and began to snort and stomp on the ground. "Oops, bad idea Puffin." I should have followed my rule. "No bear pictures, ever!"

The next few days were spent hiking south through the remaining 30 miles of trail in Shenandoah National Park. I stayed at Blackrock Hut and Calf Mountain Shelter. I had lost both Pale Horse and Broken Feather, but had my eye out for them. Broken Feather had left some notes in trail logs, so I knew he was close. When I exited the park at Waynesboro on **Day #17**, I booked a room at a bed and breakfast with a pool. Swimming in the cool water was exhilarating. The cat there befriended me; funny though, I'm not particularly fond of cats.

Dinner that evening was at the infamous Chinese buffet, where many hikers go to catch up on caloric losses sustained hiking the trail. My fortune read, "You will have many friends when you need them. 😊"



Pool at Tree Streets Inn



Casper on my pack



The night shift hadn't been bad, so far. Our ED was divided into "pods" and I was staffing the trauma/critical care pod along with several of our residents. The ED was almost always packed, but the doctors and nurses on duty had started to make a dent in the long queue of patients seeking care. The only patients still in the waiting room were those with less urgent complaints, or at least felt to be so by the triage team. I wasn't too tired, either. Night shifts had been a way of life for me over many years working as an Emergency Medicine physician.

A page came over the system, "Level 1 Trauma ETA 5 minutes. 25 yo F crashed into a building. BP 60/- P 120. EMS attempting intubation." Oh shit... Thirty years of experience in Level 1 trauma centers told me that this patient had serious life threatening injuries; we were about to be very busy. A trauma room was cleared of extraneous equipment and personnel. The trauma team, consisting of an abundance of medical professionals moved into the room and prepared for the arrival of our patient. The team included 3 emergency medicine residents, 2 surgical residents, the Trauma Surgery attending doctor, a couple of medical students, 3 nurses, a respiratory therapist, 2 ED techs, 2 radiology techs, our chaplain and the Emergency Medicine attending (myself). It seems like utter chaos with all that personnel in one room, but everyone has a job and getting ready quickly is the shared goal.

Patients with traumatic injuries who are in shock are typically categorized on how they respond to the initial administration to intravenous fluids: responders, non-

responders and transient responders. The responders typically have contained injuries and usually survive, as long as they get appropriate medical care. The non-responders may not survive and immediate, sometimes heroic, medical intervention is all that will save them. The transient responders seem like they are going to do well at first, but then their shock worsens again. These patients have ongoing internal bleeding or other life threatening injuries that must be found and treated urgently to save their lives.

Our patient arrived; EMS reported that she had driven her vehicle into a building and heavy damage was sustained to both the car and the building. Extrication was prolonged, requiring help from the fire department. Intravenous fluids had been started and airway support was given by bag-valve-mask for the unconscious patient. The team went into action. Primary survey: A, B, C, D & E. Airway (A): she needed a definitive airway. The doctor at the head of the bed and the respiratory therapist went to work. Breathing (B): being supported by bag-valve-mask. Lung sounds were difficult to hear. Circulation (C): the blood pressure had initially improved with the fluids given, the pulse remained high. Disability (D): she was unconscious and unresponsive. Exposure and Everything Else (E).

The primary survey of ABC's as well as a secondary survey didn't reveal any obvious injuries that were amenable to immediate intervention. However, her blood pressure began to fall again. Additional intravenous lines were started and fluids and blood products were given. Our ED had a mass transfusion protocol for patients requiring large amounts of blood to save their lives. The protocol was

activated, but repeated rounds of improvement were followed by deterioration into deeper and deeper levels of shock. And then there wasn't a pulse. Chest compressions started, two chest tubes were placed and additional O negative uncross-matched blood was given. Another review of our clinical findings and thoughts of best interventions to pursue revealed nothing. After a seemingly eternity of resuscitative efforts we realized there was nothing more to do; our efforts to save her life had failed. I looked over at the attending trauma surgeon and he looked back at me, "We did all we could," he said. "I know."

Many people talk about "second victims" but that concept seems trite to me, especially when the victim dies. But I was drained, every ounce of energy I had was gone, emotionally and physically. I had hoped we would save her life but failed. All I could do to keep from crying was to step to the side and keep quiet to myself. Unfortunately, there was no one to turn to for support. My pager went off, "Four patients from the waiting room are coming to open rooms in the pod." I would have to immediately get back to work caring for the woebegone patients who had waited all night to be seen.



South of Waynesboro, VA the Appalachian Trail follows the Blue Ridge Parkway, much in the same manner as it does along Skyline Drive. Waysides were a thing of the past, but frequent road crossings with views off into the surrounding valleys were still present. My first night after leaving Waynesboro, on **Day #18**, was spent at the Paul Wolfe

shelter. It's a remarkable shelter with a porch and picnic table along with a privy with a view. I watched the sunrise from the privy the next morning!

And then came the Priest. Hiking the Priest requires a 3,200 ft climb over 4 miles for SOBO's. Thru-hikers going the reverse direction have a long slow climb up the south side, followed by a steep descent and then a difficult climb up onto Three Ridges. I had been warned, but had been mentally preparing for the climb for a couple of weeks. Hiking down from Three Ridges offered spectacular views and I covered the miles quickly. I spent the night at a stealth camp near the Tye River at the base of the Priest.

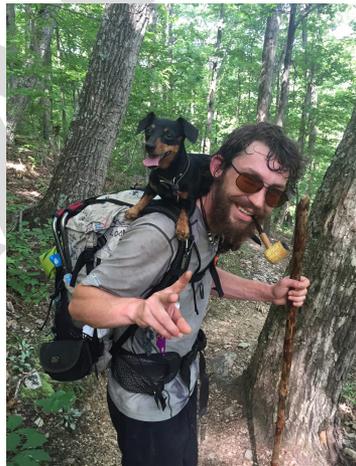
The morning on **Day #21** was sticky and humid. As I ascended the Priest, I hiked up into the clouds. Views from the trail were all obscured by the fog. Climbing in the near 100% humidity with a pack was slow and arduous; it only became more challenging as the summer heat increased. Each mile consumed an hour of time as I pressed on to the summit. Eventually, the ascent was complete and I was rewarded with spectacular views. The fog had cleared and a fresh current of dry air had arrived.

The Priest Shelter is located just south of the mountaintop. The shelter log there is a compilation of hiker "confessions." It's entertaining to read, most entries address guilty feelings about digging shallow cat holes or not precisely following all the white blazes along the AT. The remainder of the day was largely downhill and the miles passed quickly.

I had finally found a comfortable rhythm and was covering miles efficiently. I managed to slack-pack while straying at Three Springs hostel in Buena Vista, increasing my milage even more. I met Lil' Bean who was hiking NOBO well behind the bubble after getting stuck in the *vortex* at the NOC for two weeks. And I met Jazz, a miniature dachshund who had gone for a walk, a little more than 750 miles from Springer Mountain, GA. His human companion reported that Jazz had walked the entire way, except the descent down from the Dragon's Tooth. I continued to criss-cross pathways with Pale Horse and Broken Feather. The later continued to agonize about whether to try to return home or move on with his life separated from his wife. I had an analogous internal dialogue.



Lil' Bean



Jazz & his human

The Appalachian Trail crosses the James River at Glasgow, VA. The longest footbridge on the AT spans the sizable waterway before the trail ascends above the river going SOBO. After that climb, I found what looked to be an

amazing campsite next to a brook. At sunset I discovered that the brook was inhabited by a horde of chirping frogs, each searching for a mate enthusiastically through the night. Ear plugs would have been nice that night.

The late July temperatures continued to rise. Before climbing Cove Mountain in 104 degree heat, I swam in Jennings Creek. Undaunted, I shared the cool waters with a snake slithering along the surface. Since Cove Mountain had no water source, I carried 4 liters of water up the mountain from the creek. That was absolutely brutal! Sweat pored off my head and every step became more arduous until I made it to the top of the ridge. The climb broke me, physically and mentally. Something had to be done to deal with the heat. It would take me years to realize that heat intolerance was a side effect of being treated for my second cancer, thyroid. More importantly, it is manageable and over time, I have learned to adapt.

Daleville, VA lies 295 miles south of Harper's Ferry on the Appalachian Trail. I made it there on **Day #28**. I woke at 4 am that day and hiked out of camp in the dark. That was my first night hike, and to my surprise, it was fabulous! The temperature was cool and with a headlamp on, the trail was clearly visible even in the dark before morning broke. At sunrise I stopped along the trail and cooked breakfast. Sipping on a hot mocha while the sun rose was serene and a peaceful mind's rest.

I found Pale Horse in Daleville. We only spoke briefly, as he spotted a homeless person at the gas station across the street he wanted to befriend. I also found Broken Feather at the outfitter. He made it to Daleville one day ahead of

me and attended a concert in Roanoke the night before. He had decided to return home and make another go of it with his family. He would be leaving the trail. I had make the decision to return home as well. It was time to escape the heat. My first LASH on the Appalachian Trail had reached it's completion. However, I remained unsure if I would be going home permanently.

DRAFT

### 3. Wildcat

I was welcomed with aloof indifference when I arrived home from Virginia. I immediately decided to return to the trail. It was still more than a month before I would have to return to work. And, since the heat had been the driving force for me to come home, flipping north on the trail to escape the heat was an appealing option. There would also be more fellowship with the hiker bubble. NOBO thru-hikers who had started in Georgia during the spring were moving into New England on their way to Maine. (I might even see my thru-hiker friends from Northern Virginia again!) I made plane reservations to fly to Manchester, NH followed by a shuttle to the Dartmouth campus in Hanover, where the AT enters New Hampshire. I would be back on trail in less than two weeks.



It was all about coffee at first. Choosing a career that required working night shifts and a rotating schedule played a large role. Migraine headaches and spending time in the Navy did too. In fact, I can remember drinking my first nearly perfect cup of coffee. A chief petty officer on DD-826, the USS Agerholm, a Gearing class destroyer built at the end of WWII, gave me a cup of black coffee brewed in the crews mess. The unadulterated purity of that cup was bliss. Besides, the steam turbine engines on destroyers simply make them floating expresso machines.

The doctor's lounge at the hospital had one of those fancy expresso machines that made all sorts of beverages. I made myself a double expresso mocha. Other faculty members walked in and out of the lounge during their breaks from clinical work as well. Lois walked by and said, "Hello."

We had known each other from the time that she was a medical student, when I was a junior faculty member, many years earlier. She declared, “Tom mentioned that you race sailboats.” “Well, yes I sure do!” Tom was one of the neurosurgery residents at the hospital whom I knew from caring for patients in the emergency department. He was from San Diego and had raced dinghies before going to medical school and taking on one of the most demanding specialty training programs in medicine. Lois explained that she had raced sailboats before entering medical school as well.

“How have you been?”

“Well, I was sick and had to take time off work.”

“Me too...”

She had a brain tumor resected during the same time period that I had gone through treatment for melanoma and thyroid cancer.

“We should have coffee sometime...”



The flight to Manchester, followed by a private shuttle to Hanover went smoothly. Day #1 of the SOBO section hike started across the street from the expansive lawn of the Dartmouth campus, where students played frisbee and basked in the warm sun. I donned on my pack, walked down the hill, crossed the Connecticut River and entered Vermont. If you’ve ever watched the Bob Newhart show, I spent the night at their place, the Norwich Inn. Darryl and Darryl didn’t make an appearance, but the hotel did have quaint New England charm. The AT was only a block or two down the street.

The Vermont section of the Appalachian Trail is infamous for the expanse of mud that carpets the trail. Some hiker's even call it "Muddervont" or "Vermud." In addition to escaping the heat of the south, I was lucky to avoid most of the mud in Vermont. The early part of the summer was wet on the east coast, but the rain had abated for several weeks and the mud was drying up. In my mind, I had divided the Vermont trail into two sections. The northern half of the trail traverses the state east-west from Norwich to Rutland, where it joins the Long Trail. The Long Trail was the very first long distance trail in the US and runs from Massachusetts to Canada through Vermont. In Rutland, the two trails join and are oriented north-south. The combined trails traverse the Green Mountains to the Massachusetts border. Accordingly, on **Day #2** I set off SOBO on the trail heading west across the state from Norwich.



Quaint New England Charm

My first encounter was at a stream crossing, where a trail runner who had lost her way found me. She had no water and was seeking directions back to her vehicle. I happily provided both. A liter of freshly purified water from the stream and directions to follow the white blazes north to Norwich fulfilled those needs. It felt amazing to have a

chance to pay back the myriad of others who had helped me that summer.

Patience is not my greatest virtue. Even though the miles came more easily, I remained frustrated that I wasn't keeping up with younger hikers who had hundreds of miles under their belts. Striker was a companion at my first shelter. He was thru-hiking SOBO and had averaged more than 20 miles a day for the more than 450 miles from Mount Katahdin, Maine. He had another distinguishing quality, odor. Bathing on trail was not in his vocabulary. His stench was only rivaled by the effluvium from homeless souls that lack the resources and skills for routine bodily care. Ultraviolet was also at the shelter. She was given with that name because she used a Steri-Pen to purify water. She was very social and recounted numerous "Yellow Blazes" in order to keep up with her *tramily*. I felt less frustrated. These two hikers were the first SOBO thru-hikers that I would encounter. SOBO thru-hikers are a different breed. Hiking SOBO requires climbing Mount Katahdin on day one and then heading off into the 100 mile wilderness. This is followed by the challenging mountains of southern Maine and New Hampshire. By the time they've gotten to Vermont, the most difficult sections of the AT are conquered. Their challenge then becomes time. Most finish in Georgia during the late fall or winter months. Snow and sub-freezing temperatures can be common then.

On **Days #3 and #4** I found the NOBO hiker bubble. I spent one of the nights at Winturri Shelter with at least 30 thru-hikers. The shelter was completely full and tents were pitched on every square inch of flat ground in the surrounding area. Luckily, it was easy for me to find a spot

to hang my hammock above two large rocks, which served as convenient steps to get in and out of bed.

The trail to Stoney Brook shelter included a ladder climb, and was also the home to numerous thru-hikers. I found a nice spot over clear ground with a pine needle carpet. I laid out my gear there while packing in the morning. As I packed, dark clouds came over the mountain and the sky quickly darkened. Then the deluge hit. Uh oh... There was no time to pack or even grab the few precious items that had the highest priority to stay dry. Everything was soaked in an instant. The cloudburst had lasted only a brief time, that it was enough to ensure every piece of my gear was completely soaked. Fortunately, I was headed into Rutland and would be at a hostel before late afternoon.

I do have some ties to Rutland. My grandfather, Puff's father, who was a retired judge and became an alcoholic after my grandmother died of breast cancer at a young age, spent his final days in Rutland. He is buried somewhere in the town. And then there's the hostel. It's unique, to say the least. Some thru-hikers absolutely love the Yellow Deli, others spurn the place, declaring that it's run by a cult and won't have anything to do with it. I belong to the former camp. For me, perhaps the best thing about the Yellow Deli was that there's a large second floor deck with ample clothes line space to hang and dry gear from several hikers at one time. I hung everything and did laundry. I also went to the local grocery for a food resupply. Dirty Peaches, the thru-hiker I met at Rod Hollow shelter at the south end of the Roller Coaster, was in the common room with an entourage, her *tramily*.



Trail near Stoney Brook



Yellow Deli

Dinner at the Yellow Deli was amazing. Every recipe was prepared from ingredients that were home grown by members of the Twelve Tribes, the “cult.” Dinner was followed by joyous signing, dancing and celebration. Efforts to recruit me into the tribe were unoffensive and I thoroughly enjoyed the whole affair.

Killington Peak, at over 4,200 ft is the second highest mountain in Vermont. It has a functioning ski resort and the AT passes just below it’s summit. I had an idea... The municipal bus route in Rutland runs to the ski resort. During the summer, the gondola runs so tourists can visit Killington Lodge on the summit. It was time to *aeroblaze!* I would take the bus and then the gondola to the summit. There I would join the Appalachian Trail. The lodge was a great place to grab a drink and Killington summit delivered magnificent views into the valley below. A steep rock scramble down the back side of the peak returned me to the AT.



Puffin at the Summit of Killington Peak

After rejoining the AT, the trail made a long agreeable descent down the south side of Killington, after which it followed a brook to the swinging bridge crossing Clarendon Gorge. On the side of the trail a sign was posted on a tree, “Katahdin 500 Miles.” NOBO thru-hikers who had started in Georgia had hiked almost 1,700 miles to get here. Dirty Peaches and her *tramily* were laid out of the soft ground resting underneath the sign.

The weather continued to be warm, dry and pleasant. I stayed at Little Rock Pond and swam in Griffith Lake. The trail was populated with NOBO thru-hikers, SOBO thru-hikers, Long Trail hikers and section hikers. One of the northbound hikers passed me stopped and asked, “Puffin, is that you?” It was Pick-Me-Up, my companion at the Terrapin Station Hostel in Shenandoah! It was such joy to see him again, hundreds of miles from where we first met.



Dirty Peaches and Entourage - 500 Miles from Katahdin

I spent **Day #10** at the Green Mountain Hiker Hostel in Manchester Center, VT. This hostel was the nicest hostel I have stayed at on the AT. I took a zero there, and found some sausage and Bisquick in the kitchen. I made biscuits and sausage gravy for breakfast, thinking I would provide for the other hikers at the hostel. I neglected to realize that biscuits and gravy is a southern thing. The New Englanders simply turned up their noses and took a pass.

There was also an interesting sign posted at the hostel. It was publicizing the 2015 AT Trail Chaplain. Each year, the Methodist Church of Eastern Tennessee sponsors a thru hiker to minister to hikers. “Wildcat” was the year’s chaplain and was hiking SOBO from Katahdin.

Back on trail on **Day #11**, I continued to hike 10-15 miles a day, climbing and descending the peaks of the Green Mountains. At Prospect Rock I found Prana, from Pass Mountain Hut on July 4th in Shenandoah. She was still

hiking alone, but I later learned that she and the Gentleman finished their hike together at Katahdin. There may have been even more to it than that.

When I rolled into the Melville-Naunheim Shelter on **Day #13** another hiker was already there resting. It was Wildcat. This scruffy thru-hiker appeared to be seasoned and confident. He and I spoke for a while and shared trail stories. Wildcat was a *triple crowner*, he had already completed thru hikes of the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Coast Trail and Continental Divide Trail. Also, when he hiked the AT NOBO, he turned around at Katahdin, hiked back to Rutland and then completed the Long Trail. Wildcat's favorite story came from when he was hiking through the Gila Wilderness on the CDT. He got caught in a massive snow storm, which necessitated hiking 40 miles out of the wilderness in fresh deep snow. Arriving in town, he was informed that the last person to survive hiking out of the Gila Wilderness in a blizzard was Geronimo!

Wildcat was hiking the AT southbound so he could meet as many thru-hikers as possible. He would be my hiking partner for the remainder of the section and become an incredible friend. He also carried a bottle of scotch. I'm not much of a drinker, I've always feared becoming dependent, given my family history. However, I soon learned that on the trail, a shot of liquor before bed leads to peaceful painless sleep. Most hikers take large amounts of ibuprofen, *Vitamin I*. I found no need to take any after a shot of scotch. To his day, I carry a small flask of whiskey for a nite-cap on trail. Thanks Wildcat...

**Days #14 and #15** were spent hiking the final miles in Vermont with Wildcat. I was surprised to learn how much we had in common during our conversation. Wildcat took his trail name from the Kansas State mascot. He had graduated from K State, although he started college at the Air Force Academy. (Perhaps I should be Blue Jay instead of Puffin.) He also was divorced and began long distance hiking during his second marriage. And of course, I heard many more entertaining stories about hiking the Triple Crown.

The weather continued to cooperate and we hiked over mountains, past streams and a few beaver ponds, too. As we hiked past one beaver pond a young woman with blonde hair and braids all decked out in warm weather backpacking gear passed us going NOBO. She stopped and greeted us with the most glorious southern drawl. “Hey y’all. Dixie here. How ya doing?” Both Wildcat and I were stupefied. What in the world was this Southern Belle doing here on the trail in New England hiking all alone? We stopped and talked for quite a while. Dixie was an electrical engineer from Alabama who had walked away from her job to hike the AT in order to reset her life. We exchanged pictures and went on our way. If I had only known...

Almost everyone who is familiar with the backpacking community has heard of Dixie. Jessica Mills, trail name “Dixie”, is perhaps the most well known long distance backpacker in the United States. Dixie started a web page, [homemadewanderlust.com](http://homemadewanderlust.com) along with her thru-hike in 2015. She also started a YouTube channel, which now has more than 600 videos and almost 500K subscribers! More

impressively, she has continued to hike long distance trails. She quickly became a Triple Crowner and has hiked numerous other long distance trails in the U.S. as well as around the world. And, Dixie is absolutely fearless. She has been a featured speaker at hiking conventions and offers sound advice to anyone considering any backpacking endeavor. And to think, I met Dixie before she was downright famous.



Dixie

Day #16 was spent in Williams, Mass with my brother, Nat, who drove from Boston to visit. He and I toured the art museum at the college and went to dinner. The museum was filled with amazing Remington's, historical portraits and modern art. The next morning, Nat dropped me off at the summit of Mount Greylock. Typically the view from the highest point in Massachusetts is stellar, but that day the peak was shrouded in fog and there was nothing to see. I bade Nat goodbye and hiked off into the wilderness. My goal for the day was to catch up with Wildcat who was a day ahead of me. The long downhill hike from Greylock to Dalton, Mass went quickly. Remarkably, when I arrived in the late afternoon, there was Wildcat sitting in a rocking chair on Tom Levardi's porch. I was 24 miles from Williams and had reunited with my hiking partner. We walked down

to the local pub and had an amazing prime rib plate for dinner.



There is a large lobby at the entrance of the Center for Advance Medicine; a Starbuck's is located there too. Lois and I met there for coffee and escaped the hectic arena of our chosen vocation. Explaining the escape to an outsider is challenging. Being a physician comes with numerous rewards, financial and otherwise. In particular, engaging in a vocation where your primary goal is to directly and positively impact the lives of others, often complete strangers, is rewarding beyond belief. However, the responsibilities can be daunting. A plethora of administrators, insurance companies and supervisory organizations are constantly second guessing physician actions making caring for patients as easy as walking in quicksand.

We talked about work and sailing; we also reflected upon our recent illnesses that had taken us away from work for extended periods. That type of illness gives one a new perspective on life. The fact that life is finite becomes crystal clear and one's focus changes from the inescapable short-term goals of daily life's rat race to long-term goals that emphasize wellness, happiness and the betterment of mankind. I also told her about my plans to hike the Appalachian Trail. "It is said that people find purpose and meaning hiking the trail. We'll see when I get back in the fall."



Hiking with Wildcat, bigger miles came easily on the relatively flat and unimpeded trail in western Massachusetts. Trail stories and philosophical discussions passed the time as we headed for Upper Goose Pond. There's a "shelter" there; it's really more of a house in the wilderness with a large bunk room on the upper floor. It has a porch and a living room on the main floor along with a kitchen where the caretaker prepares pancakes every morning for thru-hikers. When blueberries are in season, hikers bring them from the trail to add to the pancakes. There's also a dock on the pond with a canoe.



Wildcat on the porch at Upper Goose Pond

Wildcat and I spent the long summer evening canoeing, exploring the body of water. As we paddled around the island on the lake, the placid surface was only interrupted by the canoe as the sun set over the trees along the shore.

Wildcat had a great message. He hiked the AT carrying copies of the *Desiderata*, a verse written by Max Hermann in 1927. It gave me peace and hope for the future.

DESIDERATA

GO PLACIDLY AMID THE NOISE AND THE HASTE, AND REMEMBER WHAT PEACE THERE MAY BE IN SILENCE. AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, WITHOUT SURRENDER, BE ON GOOD TERMS WITH ALL PERSONS.

SPEAK YOUR TRUTH QUIETLY AND CLEARLY; AND LISTEN TO OTHERS, EVEN TO THE DULL AND THE IGNORANT; THEY TOO HAVE THEIR STORY.

AVOID LOUD AND AGGRESSIVE PERSONS; THEY ARE VEXATIOUS TO THE SPIRIT. IF YOU COMPARE YOURSELF WITH OTHERS, YOU MAY BECOME VAIN OR BITTER, FOR ALWAYS THERE WILL BE GREATER AND LESSER PERSONS THAN YOURSELF.

ENJOY YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS AS WELL AS YOUR PLANS. KEEP INTERESTED IN YOUR OWN CAREER, HOWEVER HUMBLE; IT IS A REAL POSSESSION IN THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF TIME.

EXERCISE CAUTION IN YOUR BUSINESS AFFAIRS, FOR THE WORLD IS FULL OF TRICKERY. BUT LET THIS NOT BLIND YOU TO WHAT VIRTUE THERE IS; MANY PERSONS STRIVE FOR HIGH IDEALS, AND EVERYWHERE LIFE IS FULL OF HEROISM.

BE YOURSELF. ESPECIALY DO NOT FEIGN AFFECTION. NEITHER BE CYNICAL ABOUT LOVE; FOR IN THE FACE OF ALL ARIDITY AND DISENCHANTMENT, IT IS AS PERENNIAL AS THE GRASS.

TAKE KINDLY THE COUNSEL OF THE YEARS, GRACEFULLY SURRENDERING THE THINGS OF YOUTH.

NURTURE STRENGTH OF SPIRIT TO SHIELD YOU IN SUDDEN MISFORTUNE. BUT DO NOT DISTRESS YOURSELF WITH DARK IMAGININGS. MANY FEARS ARE BORN OF FATIGUE AND LONELINESS.

BEYOND A WHOLESOME DISCIPLINE, BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF. YOU ARE A CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE NO LESS THAN THE TREES AND THE STARS; YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO BE HERE.

AND WHETHER OR NOT IT IS CLEAR TO YOU, NO DOUBT THE UNIVERSE IS UNFOLDING AS IT SHOULD.

THEREFORE BE AT PEACE WITH GOD, WHATEVER YOU CONCEIVE HIM TO BE. AND WHATEVER YOUR LABORS AND ASPIRATIONS, IN THE NOISY CONFUSION OF LIFE, KEEP PEACE IN YOUR SOUL. WITH ALL ITS SHAM, DRUDGERY AND BROKEN DREAMS, IT IS STILL A BEAUTIFUL WORLD. BE CHEERFUL. STRIVE TO BE HAPPY.

BY MAX EHRMANN © 1927

I would be finishing my hike in a couple of days. It was less than 20 miles to Great Barrington. There I would get a ride to Albany for a flight home. After hiking more than 500

miles on the AT and having weeks to contemplate my life, it was decision time; the moment to “fish or cut bait.” More than anything, the realization that time would always march on, along with the inevitable fact that life is finite made my decision. I needed change in my life. I looked back at my New Year’s resolutions from 2014. Outdoor activities were now again a large part of my life. My marriage remained injurious to my physiological well-being. After more than 35 years, I realized that the only way for me to be happier was to leave. I never thought...

Peace came to me while hiking the final two days into Great Barrington with Wildcat. Phlatlander, another SOBO Thru-hiker, joined us and the three of us hitched into Great Barrington from the road crossing. We spent the night in town and the next morning, a long time friend from Albany picked me up for a ride to the airport. I was on my way home ready to embark on a new journey.



*Phlatlander needed new trekking poles and lacked the money to buy a new pair. I didn't take mine home with me...*

The Trail Will Provide

# 4. Betsy B

Some sections are longer and some are shorter.

After returning home, I moved into my own apartment. My time was spent working, having coffee with Lois and planning for my next section hike. Over the winter I packed and re-packed my gear multiple times. I weighed and re-weighed my pack, watching every gram. Finally, in early July I flew back to Albany, eventually getting back on trail in Great Barrington. I started right where I finished in 2015, ready to get some more big miles out of the way.

My first night was spent at the Tom Leonard shelter with several thru-hikers. The evening's topic of conversation covered the many things that can take a hiker off trail. Illness, injury, financial hardships, family emergencies and weather were all on the list. Everyone agreed, however, that the one thing that would inevitably take a hiker off the trail was a lack of water. That was a strange concept to me, since water had been plentiful in 2015. Perhaps the reason we all agreed was that 2016 was drought year on the AT.



Filtering Water at Tom Leonard Shelter



No parent complains that they spend an excessive amount of time with their children, in fact, it is a true blessing to have children who are willing to associate with their parents. I was accordingly blessed. At the end of Andrew's (a.k.a. Barbershop's) freshman year, I drove to Omaha from St Louis to retrieve him along with the contents of his college dorm room. His residence hall buddies, who would become life-long friends, Andrew, and I played games late into the night. The next morning we set off in a mini-van loaded with belongings on a hazy warm summer day. Andrew drove and I quickly fell asleep in the passenger seat.

A low pitched scraping vibration woke me. I had drifted off to sleep, Andrew had drifted off to sleep and the car, at 70 miles an hour, had drifted off onto the left shoulder. He woke startled and jerked the car back onto the highway. Fate, not to be outdone by Andrew's quick response, countered with a blown left front tire. The steering wheel jerked back to the left and the minivan dove down into the median. Time stopped. Every fraction of a second became crystal clear during the transit across the interstate. Most vividly, I recall an eighteen wheeler on the opposite side of the highway on a collision course. Acceleration down into the median was followed by an air launch into the opposite lanes. To this day, I don't understand how we survived. The eighteen wheeler saw us coming; the driver pulled over to offer assistance. The car landed on the highway, blew the remaining 3 tires and finally stopped back down in the median. The car never rolled and the only "damage" sustained was four blown tires. I recall turning to Andrew

and shaking his hand, offering congratulations for avoiding a catastrophic outcome. The truck driver rushed to check on our condition, and learning that all was remarkably well, offered to provide a ride to the next exit to seek assistance. The car was towed to a gas station where the tires were re-inflated and after a nap, we were back on the road. Neither Andrew nor I have ever driven without adequate rest again.



In the morning I set off SOBO with 2 liters of water, aiming to hike 14 miles to the next shelter and known water source. It was hot, even in the early morning. It was humid too. Sweat poured off my forehead and every rock at my feet was covered in slick condensation. Hiking was arduous and I barely covered a mile each hour. After three hours, I had consumed my first liter of water and was starting to wonder where I would be able to refill another. Then I stepped on one of the slick rocks and lost balance. I stretched out with a pole to balance myself; the pole snapped and down I went! So there I was on the ground, disheartened, scraped up and with a broken trekking pole. To make matters worse, an urgent need to use the restroom arose. I'll spare the details, but getting up and moving off trail to take care of necessities took longer than required. I didn't make it in time. Consequently, my day had started with a slow pace, superficial injuries from the fall, a broken trekking pole, a lack of water and a required change of clothes. I was demoralized but hiked on.

A NOBO hiker passed me and stopped to talk. He asked where he could find water. I detailed where the water

source was a Tom Leonard shelter, three miles ahead for him. The stream, which was down a long hill, was barely flowing, but usable. I asked him, “Where’s the next water SOBO?” His response was, “I didn’t see any...” I had one liter of water and no water until the shelter, 11 miles ahead. The heat and the humidity were oppressive and I was moving slowly. It became immediately obvious that my section hike was over, just as it was only beginning. I found a ride at the next road crossing and headed back into Great Barrington.

As it turned out, flights back to St Louis on short notice were prohibitively expensive, but one to BWI was not. My stepmother, Betsy who I love dearly, lives on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; it was time to visit her and go to the beach. And that’s where I headed.

I spent over a week with Betsy. I did errands around the house, visited the beach, and rummaged through the basement. To my joy, I found Puff’s watercolor portfolio tucked away in a corner. I recollected, sorted, and

cataloged at least 25 of her paintings that had been stored there for many years. When I returned home to St Louis, the portfolio went with me. After restoration and matting, the artwork was distributed amongst three brothers.



Tall Ships in NY Harbor, 1976

## 5. JagHappy

After the disastrous drought of 2016, I was anxious to get back on trail in 2017 to give it another go. I would hike earlier in the year this time and I even had a hiking partner. A friend from St Louis, Dan, who took the trail name “Optimist” was beginning a flip-flop hike in Harpers Ferry on March 19th. Optimist and I did several training hikes around St Louis and we met in Harpers Ferry on the start date.

We set out on the trail on a cool sunny March morning. As is almost always the case, the hike began with a climb, this one up to Weatherton Heights, which sports amazing views down onto the Potomac River below. From there we cut across Gathland State Park and eventually stopped at Crampton Gap Shelter, 11 miles from Harpers Ferry. At least I stopped there. Optimist had fallen behind and promised to meet me at the shelter. He never showed up.

I crawled out of my hammock early in the morning, ready to get hiking again. **Day #1** had been a resounding success and I was eager to have another successful day. I cooked oatmeal and a hot mocha for breakfast, packed my gear and hiked up the side trail from the shelter back to the AT. It wasn't long before I passed a hammock and tarp set up along side the trail. It was Optimist. He had missed the turn-off to the shelter and stealth camped alongside the trail. Rhythmic snoring emanated from the hammock. The first day had been hard on Optimist and he was still recovering. Optimist woke and I told him that I would find him later in the day down the trail. Unfortunately, his pace

slowed and he never caught up. The best laid plans of mice and men...

**Day #2** was a glorious hike through history. The original Washington Monument is in Maryland along the AT and the trail also traverses Antietam Battlefield. The civil war battle on September 17, 1862 was the bloodiest day in American History. 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or missing after 12 hours of fighting. The worst of the fighting was along the Sunken Road, now known as Bloody Lane, where there were over 5,500 casualties in the center of Robert E. Lee's line.



After crossing I-70 my 14 mile hike for the day ended at Annapolis Rocks. I had the spot all to myself. The popular and usually crowded campground was empty mid-week in March.

On **Day #3** a cold front came through. The temperature dropped and the wind increased. I donned my hat, buff, gloves and puffy to stay warm, even with the exertion of hiking the 11 miles to Raven Rock Shelter, my destination for the night. I stopped at the Ensign Cowall Shelter for a break. Phillip Cowall was a graduate of the Coast Guard Academy and was killed on a motorcycle when he was hit by an 18-wheeler on the Baltimore Beltway. His father was an oncologist and treated both my mother and step-mother for breast cancer. Years ago, I met Phillip while visiting my parents on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Several other hikers were at Raven Rock Shelter for the night, two had slack-packed to the shelter. JagHappy, monikered from his resemblance to Mic Jagger and joyful disposition, began his second year of hiking the trail in Waynesboro in early March. He had hiked through Shenandoah in deep snow, but was making good progress. His thru-hike, which began the previous year, was cut short by a family emergency. He was back to finish.



The temperature that night fell below 20° F. Everyone and everything froze, except for my water which spent the night in my quilt to stay warm. Jag Happy made the trek to get water the previous evening, so I was glad to share my unfrozen supply with him for morning coffee. We set off on the trail together, heading out of Maryland into Pennsylvania.

Tumbling Run Shelter in southern Pennsylvania is truly special. The shelter care-takers take particular pride in their domain. The shelter sports a well-kept privy, adorned with a light switch for night use. There's no light nor electricity, regrettably. The picnic table sits underneath a pavilion in between two shelters. One labelled for snorers and the other non-snorers. JagHappy slept in the "Snoring" shelter. I slept in my hammock.

**Day #5** was spent hiking along the ridge interrupted by quite a few spots where climbing over boulders was required. The weather was warming and we were headed to Trail of Hope Hostel for the night. A bed, shower, laundry and resupply were in the very near future.

JagHappy genuinely loved *slack-packing*. The proprietor at the hostel had offered to drive us 20 miles NOBO to Pine Grove Furnace, so we could *slack-pack* back to the hostel for another night in a warm bed. We took him up on the offer, even though I was unsure if I would be able to hike more than 20 miles in one day. I was reassured that the trail was easy and the 20 mile hike would pass quickly.

The Pine Grove Furnace General Store is home to the infamous Half Gallon Challenge, where thru-hikers down a half gallon of ice cream. Most all finish the ice cream easily, the contest is who can finish the fastest. In March, both the General Store and AT Museum were closed. The challenge was not to be for us. But as promised, the trail back to the hostel was well groomed and the weather was exceptional. Without a 20 lb pack on my back, the miles came easily. Along the way, I passed the sign that marks the mid-point of the Appalachian Trail. The sign is mobile, and moves each



AT Mid-point 2017

year. As the trail gets re-routed, the total length of the trail changes slightly.

The 20 mile hike ended at Caledonia State Park, where I joined JagHappy along with one of his hiking partners from 2016 for dinner on the patio at a local restaurant. I had completed my first 20 mile day, and along with that, had hiked 80 miles in just 6 days. Jag Happy had turned out to be a fabulous hiking partner that inspired me to do bigger miles.



In South St Louis County there's a park with hiking trails along the bluffs above the Meramec River. The park has an abundant deer population and it's a serene location for a stroll through the woods. After I returned from the Virginia section of the AT, Lois and I met there for a walk. That was the first time we saw each other away from work. Perhaps because I was still seeking my course at that time, it was a memorable event. The burdens of work and lack of contentment at home were areas of common ground that filled our conversation. We walked and talked; I felt settled and more directed.



JagHappy and I hiked together on **Days #7 and #8**. We *slack-packed* out of Pine Grove Furnace and covered the 27 miles of trail to Carlisle, PA over two easy days. After walking along the ridge amongst the boulders, we descended into the Cumberland Valley and hiked through open farm land. We had dinner together in Carlisle where JagHappy announced that he would *zero* there. I would continue on solo, but had found my mojo thanks to him. JagHappy would continue on and finish the AT in just a few months. He also wrote a book, “No Rain, No Pain, No Maine,” which I bought and read with zeal.

Duncannon, PA is less than 20 miles from Carlisle and I was beginning to feel the urge to be home in St Louis. My divorce had finalized and I was still living in my apartment alone. A cold front and rain was on the way. It was time to go home and find a place to live.



A house was on the market on a private street right next to the county park. There was no street signage and the only listing was on-line. But, the photos of the interior looked pretty darn amazing. A large wooden spiral staircase, constructed of a deep warm brown pine, ran from the lower level through a two story great room up to a bedroom loft above. The owner was recently widowed and wanting to sell. Most importantly, it was a step up from my prior living arrangements. I did not want to start a new path in life in a situation anything less than that I had left.

Lois and I met our real estate agent at the house tour. She had done her research and offered lots of information about the house. After the walk through it was immediately obvious that it was exactly what we were seeking. I had only one question, “Can I park a sailboat in the driveway?” To my joy, the answer was, “Yes! There’s no HOA or ordinances to the contrary.” A contract was submitted that day. Our agent made the sale in less than an hour.



I returned to Duncannon in June of 2018. My flight from St Louis to Philly was delayed but departed just before a whopping great storm hit the airport, doing significant damage. A tornado actually hit the terminal!

My first night on trail was spent camping at an amazing spot on the ridge overlooking Harrisburg, PA. The view, especially after sunset, was fantastic. So was the wind. My hammock rocked and rolled all night long. After restless sleep, I woke in the morning and packed for the ridge walk to my planned destination. The hike that day was uneventful, and I stealth camped near a small water source at the bottom of the ridge.

What I didn’t realize was that the front which delivered tornados to St Louis had followed me across the country and was only hours away. During the night it hit. Six inches of rain fell over 2 and a half hours. I woke during the storm and looked down out of my hammock. A river ran underneath. All there was to do was hunker down and wait for it to pass.



Washed Out AT

In the morning, the sky cleared and it was a beautiful day. Examination of my pack and equipment revealed that everything had weathered the storm exceptionally well. It was hard to believe; I had never seen it rain so hard. I set off on the trail after a trail mocha and oatmeal. The first road crossing was less than a half mile away; the trail crossed a small stream on the far side of the gravel parking lot on the other side. This morning it wasn't a small stream. The six inches of rain turned the stream into a 50

yard wide and chest deep raging torrent. There was no crossing that waterway. So off came my pack and I sat down with my phone to find a way around. It looked like I might be able to hitch around the flood and get back on the trail a few miles to the north. The only problem was that all the traffic was made up of morning commuters going to work in Harrisburg the other way. So there I sat, soon to be joined by four other hikers who joined my sit-in.

We all took turns standing by the road with a thumb out. It seemed like forever. The few cars or pickups going our way just passed by. Eventually a car stopped. A small rusted out 2 door sedan with a congenial driver saw our dilemma and offered to help out. Enter the clown car. Five

hikers and all our gear squeezed into the tiny vehicle. Packs and hiking partners were in laps, close friends were made quickly. Off we went around the flood.

The extent of the water was impressive. A reservoir upstream of the trail crossing was flooded out as well. It wasn't until several miles further up the trail that we found a place that we were able to resume hiking. There continued to be washed out areas along the trail for the remainder of the day. Eventually a bridge crossed a creek under I-81. The trail on the far side of the bridge was chest high in flood water. It was time to get off trail and wait for the water to abate. I headed to a hotel only 2 miles south along another trail above the creek. I would take an Uber the next morning to the other side of the flooded creek to resume hiking.

I had weathered the storm and now it was time to get hiking again. The day started out with a climb up to the top of the ridge, as usual. The trail was initially wide, flat and unobstructed. But Pennsylvania is famous for its rocks; this was where they began. The first cluster of rocks was a collection of pointy sharp scree. There was no where to find any flat surface to place a foot, the only choice was to balance on a sharp spike with every step. Crossing the cluster was slow and uncomfortable. During the day the areas of rocks grew more frequent and wider. It became quickly obvious why many AT hikers dislike hiking through the state.

But the day was still wondrous. The sky was clear and the weather, although somewhat stifling, was overall great for hiking. I met two hikers that day; both would join me for

the next few days. I met Tim climbing the ridge at the beginning of the day. He and I had remarkably similar gear and hiked at similar speeds. He was also a section hiker, looking to hike through his home state this trip. And then there was Trouble. I'm not sure from where he came. All of a sudden I was hiking with this jovial and vociferous character who journeyed seemingly effortlessly along the trail. I was inspired to hike longer and faster by the tall lean and fit gray haired backpacker.

After stays at the 501 Shelter and Eagles Nest Shelter, the miles went by quickly, except for when the trail was interrupted by additional conglomerations of PA rocks. The final mile was a steep 1,000 ft descent to the Schuylkill River before arriving in Port Clinton, PA. It was there that I decided it was time to go home again. For the first time in my life I missed home and I wanted to be there.

# 6. Stronghold

At the start of 2019, I had hiked over 700 miles on the trail and in 6 states including: Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Massachusetts. Virginia includes the most miles on the AT of any state, with with over 500 miles of trail. It was time to return to Virginia and complete the additional 260 miles that I had not yet negotiated. So the planning began again. I would hike SOBO in May for better weather and most importantly, to hike through the NOBO hiker bubble.

There are lots of challenges hiking on the Appalachian Trail. The biggest is mental; there are days when I say to myself, “What in the name of JC am I doing out here?” That’s when it’s tempting to pack up and head home. The most common advice thru-hikers give each other is to “embrace the suck.” I’ve done that and am willing to deal with cold, heat and rain; no problem. But still, why? That’s where SCORE comes in; it’s an acronym I made to remind myself why I’m out there:

**Spiritual** - The vision quest

**Challenge** - Take on the challenge of making the goal for the section and eventually finishing the AT

**Outdoors** - Get outside and enjoy nature

**Rest** - Take a break from the rat race

**Exercise** - Get back into shape and get those trail legs again

I made the decision that on this section I would be addressing the spiritual aspect; it would be interesting...

Getting to the trail is also interesting. This section was no different. I flew to Reagan Airport in DC, took the Metro to Alexandria, got on Amtrak to Roanoke and finally got in an Uber to Daleville. And there I was, right where I had ended my very first section in 2015, ready to take on the remainder of Virginia.

I woke early on **Day #1**, eager to get started. I had let myself get out of shape again, so I knew the pace would be slow. And, as always, the day began with a long climb to the top of a ridge. The weather was warm and the sky was clear. The views from the top of the ridge were magnificent. A large lake spread out across the valley to the west and Daleville was laid out to the east. Several hours into the hike I found myself at a overlook with clear views over green lush farmland. I took off my pack and laid down on the cool smooth rock surface. With my head resting on my pack I fell into a deep sleep. This was one of many delightful trail naps. I woke reenergized and ready to continue on for many more miles during the day.



The American Board of Emergency Medicine requires physicians accredited by them to re-certify every ten years. In 2007 it was time for me go through that process and take the re-certification exam. In addition to being very expensive, the all day examination requires months of preparation and study. I had put that time and effort in and was well prepared.

Betsy called me in the morning before I left home to take the exam. She had gone to visit my stepsister and hadn't been able to get in touch with my dad during her drive home to the Eastern Shore. The police were called and they found him collapsed on the floor next to the bed. The best any of us could figure out he woke during the early morning hours, had a cardiac event and died suddenly. I had no choice but to take the exam. Compartmentalization was the key to success.

The funeral was amazing but difficult. I was asked to deliver a eulogy; I was so overcome with grief it was almost impossible. The contrast between my mother's death, which was expected and my father's which was not, was staggering. He was laid to rest at the Maryland Eastern Shore Veteran's Cemetery. The cemetery is laid out amidst open farmland. It is exceptionally maintained with trees, flowers and a central tower with clarion bells on the grounds. It's a nice place to spend eternity.

During the drive back to the airport after the funeral my mother-in-law called. My father-in-law, a physics professor at University of Maryland, had a cerebral hemorrhage and was in the ICU at Washington Hospital Center. He was stable, but instead of going to the airport, a change of plans took us to the hospital. Another call shortly before arriving informed us that he had taken a turn for the worse.

I sat at the console reviewing the just completed CT scan with the ICU doctor. A secondary hemorrhage filled his middle brain stem. This area of the brain controls consciousness and was permanently damaged; he would never regain consciousness. Explaining this to my mother-

in-law, one of the most wonderful people I have ever known, was surreal, even though I had complete confidence in my conclusion. I had seen this exact scenario many times before and lectured on the subject to medical students for 20 years. Life support was removed and he died within the hour.

Before returning home I attended a second funeral.

In early December friends from out of town visited. We went out to dinner at a well renowned restaurant in Soulard, a trendy historic neighborhood in south St Louis, located just across the highway from the Anheuser Busch brewery. Dinner consisted of cocktails, oysters, and an amazing amberjack special. Later that night I became deathly ill. Other than nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, a perplexing constellation of symptoms was present. Every muscle in my body was racked with excruciating burning pain, particularly my pectorals and masseters. My lips, feet and hands tingled. I laid towels on the bathroom floor to alleviate the burning pain that stepping on the cold floor brought. I wore a hat and gloves, even indoors for several weeks. There's not much worse than being sick and not knowing what's wrong, especially if you make diagnoses for a living.

The answer was in the newspaper about a week later. The health department had reported an outbreak of ciguatera poisoning in St Louis. A tainted amberjack had been harvested in the Gulf of Mexico and shipped to St Louis where it had been sold to several restaurants, including where I ate the poisoned fish. Fortunately several of my colleagues were toxicologists and knew about it. "Hmmm,

yep you've got it!" Luckily an antidote exists and it was given to me. Unfortunately, that was after I was given a course of antibiotics for what might have been an infection. That was followed by a Clostridium Difficile infection. C. Diff colitis is no fun. I described the sensation associated with the infection as a "pine cone lit on fire in my rectum." An English professor who had it described it to me as, "a vulture stuck its talons into my rectum and ripped out my entrails." That was much more eloquent. I spent Christmas admitted to the hospital for treatment. That's how I spent what I consider to be the worst two months of my life.

I have since become somewhat of a diagnostic expert on ciguatera poisoning, the most common fish poisoning in the tropics. Washington University Toxicologists considers themselves a center of excellence for ciguatera treatment. Short of toxicologists in Miami, the most knowledgeable doctors in the country on the subject are in St Louis. I have since seen many patients returning from the Caribbean with ciguatera after eating tropical fin fish, most recently just a few days before this writing.



My first stop was the Lamberts Meadow shelter. An extensive campground and shelter are laid out along Sawmill Branch. It's an amazing place to camp. I had hiked 9 miles from Daleville, but it was only 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The sun was out and to boot, the shelter was occupied with an elderly woman out for the weekend who expected to have the entire shelter to herself and her

companion. It was easy to decide to hike on another 6 miles past the Tinker Cliffs towards the second part of the Virginia Triple Crown, McAfee Knob. It wasn't until 10 pm that I made it to the shelter, but the hike was nice. At sunset a bear scrambled down a tree next to the trail and ran away.

I woke to a light rain on **Day #2** and after packing, climbed the final mile to McAfee Knob. Expansive views extend 180 degrees from the overlook, which is the most photographed location on the Appalachian Trail. Since it was early in the day, it was not crowded. What a joy!



Puffin at McAfee Knob

I had made plans before embarking on the section to make a couple of stops in Catawba, just south of McAfee Knob. One of my trainees had hiked the AT after attending college at Virginia Tech. He had friends who lived just off the trail. A infamous restaurant, the Home Place, was also located there. Hence, at the first trailhead, I embarked on a road walk to the Home Place. My mid-day meal consisted of all you can eat roast beef, fried chicken and all of the fixings. After calling Jake and Kristi, I was invited to spend the night with them. They offered to slack-pack me for the third segment of the Triple Crown.

On **Day #3** I set out for the Dragon's Tooth and a 15 mile slack-pack. It sprinkled rain on and off all day, but to my surprise, after the steep climb to the infamous formation, where Jazz the dachshund had to be carried, the hike was pleasant and I easily covered the miles. In fact, through the Brush Mountain Wilderness past the Audie Murphy monument was perhaps the best groomed trail I had encountered. Murphy was the most decorated U.S. soldier in WWII and had a successful acting career after the war. He died in a small plane crash in the mountains near that spot on the AT. It was there that I found trail magic. A cooler packed with Starbucks cold brew coffee sat on a bench next to the trail. My decent out of the Brush Mountain Wilderness was energized.

I spent the morning of **Day #4** doing laundry at Jake and Kristi's and headed back on trail that afternoon. But not before I heard the news. A crazed hiker had attacked two thru-hikers at the Crawfish Trail campsite, 100 miles south of my location. The crazed man, who had a history of psychological illness, drug use and previous reports of

violent threats to others had attacked “Stronghold” and a female Canadian companion with a machete. Police picked up an emergency beacon from Stronghold’s cell phone but he was eventually found dead from numerous slash wounds. The Canadian hiker had escaped and immediately returned home. Her identity remains undisclosed to this day. I would be hiking through that location in a short time.

The next few days were spent hiking south to Pearisburg, VA. The weather turned cold and I put on every piece of clothing that I carried. I stealth camped twice and stayed at two shelters with other hikers. I met many NOBO’s and even a couple of SOBO’s. On **Day #8** I hiked into Pearisburg, VA.

I had a room reserved at the Plaza Motel. A *bounce box* was also there to restock essentials. The Plaza is one of those motels that I would drive past and wonder who in the world would stay there. It’s a cinder block structure decorated in the style of the early 60’s. Rooms are mostly let to construction workers and hiker trash. The small front office was empty when I arrived, and I rang for help. A dowdy middle aged woman in a house coat with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth emerged from a dark room behind the counter.

“Good afternoon sweetie. Are you checking in?”

“Yes, and there should be a box I mailed to be picked up too,” I replied.

“Let me go find it. And, if you have any laundry get it out for me. I’ll do it for you.” She disappeared in the back

room for a minute or two and emerged with my supply box.

Supply box in hand I went to my room, which was spartan but freshly painted and immaculate. After camping on trail for four nights it felt like a palace. Forty-five minutes later, clean and neatly folded laundry was delivered to my room free of charge.

On **Day #10** I left the Plaza, climbed 1,700 ft to Angels Rest and then hiked along the ridge. The views overlooking the valley below were breathtaking and the flora was even more remarkable. It was late May and the rhododendrons were in bloom. Tunnels of green and pink covered the trail along with an abundance of blooming mountain flowers. The Appalachian Trail was alive in all its pageantry. The day concluded at Wood's Hole Hostel. The establishment is a favorite amongst thru-hikers. It's rustic but clean and dinner is prepared from local ingredients daily. It reminded me of the Yellow Deli, run by hiker hippies instead of a religious cult.

South of Woods Hole the AT follows the ridge around the headwaters of Dismal Creek. A *blue blazed* trail cuts across the headwaters and rejoins the AT several miles further along. So I was off exploring! I descended into the basin and meandered along several tributaries of the creek. Shortly before rejoining the AT I met another hiker who unexpectedly asked, "Is this the trail to the shelter?" He was a thru-hiker who had started at Springer Mountain and hiked over 600 miles simply by following white blazes without a map, compass or any electronic navigation. I explained that he was off trail and that the shelter was

further along NOBO on trail. I doubted the prudence of hiking without guidance but his success to that point was evidence to how simple hiking the trail can be.

The AT follows Dismal Creek past Dismal Falls (gorgeous, not dismal) to Trent's Grocery. The hiker friendly grocery is really more of a gas station with a grill and convenience store attached. May hikers get short-term resupply here; I had a burger and a soda. Later in the afternoon, looking for a place for the night, I called Licksillet Hostel. It's an old church repurposed into a hiker haven. Mongo, the manager, informed me that they were full up for the night, but after some discussion, invited me to sleep on the couch; I accepted.



Shower Shed at Licksillet

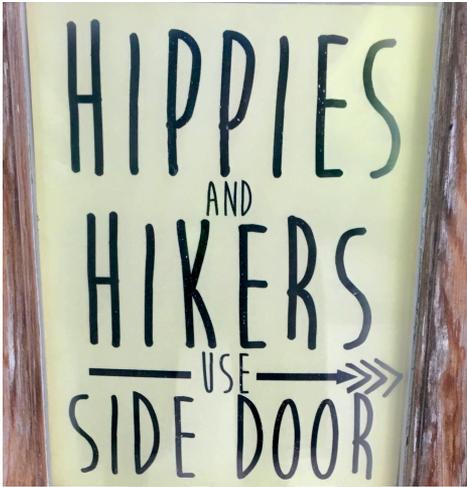
Mongo was waiting for me at the trail head. The hostel provided fellowship with other hikers, left over lasagna from a church dinner and a glorious hot shower in their shed. And, I slept like a baby on the couch.

It was pure joy to stay there after covering more than 20 miles of trail from Woods Hole in a single day.

**Day #12** was spent hiking 11 miles without a water source to Helvey's Mill Shelter. Several more high mileage days followed, and the pleasant May weather continued. I would be remiss not to chronicle the large number of NOBO thru-hikers I encountered along the way. I was definitely in

the *bubble*. The *tramily* at one shelter was lead by “Showstopper,” named because of his love of the theatre. He was a burly six-foot four-inch British hiker with jet black hair who dressed in a red onesie. His appearance reminded me of Freddie Mercury, and with a personality to match.

On **Day #15** I hiked to the Quarterway Inn. Tina, who thru-hiked the AT SOBO, runs the hostel and provides an amazing breakfast along with laundry, short-term resupply and bunk house style bedding. About an hour after sunset



Welcome sign at Quarterway Inn

I went out to the road in front of the Inn looking for a cell signal. A large field extends out across the road. It was filled with thousands of fireflies that lit up the dark expanse. Two weeks previously, I set out on the section looking for the spiritual countenance of the trail, and I had finally found it.

Just south of Quarterway Inn a sign along the trail marks 1/4 of the length of the trail. Further on, I walked through the Crawfish Trail campsite where Stronghold had been killed. The site was empty but it was not difficult to imagine the atrocity that had occurred on the site only a handful of days before. As I hiked further south, images of the female thru-hiker the escaping the site ran through my head. I could





Feathers a.k.a. Dory

A NOBO thru-hiker, an elvish hippie-like figure with a grey goatee carrying an assortment of feathers approached. He was a retired cruise ship florist who was hiking the trail collecting feathers because they lightened his load. He denied having a trail name; I proposed “Feathers.” I would later learn from other NOBO hikers that he did indeed have a trail name that he could never remember. Perhaps “Dory” would have been more befitting.

The day ended at the Mount Rogers headquarters where after being unable to obtain a shuttle, I hitchhiked into Marion, VA for a day of rest and resupply. I had covered just short of 200 miles and was about to enter the Mount Rogers Wilderness and the Grayson Highlands, where the famous wild ponies graze. So far it had been an outstanding section!

Over **Days #19 and #20** I covered 24 miles in the wilderness, staying at shelters with numerous NOBO thru-hikers. Bear warnings were posted at several locations, but were accompanied by notice that bear boxes, large metal

food storage containers, had been installed at all of the shelters. Problem solved, well done Forest Service!

**Day #21** of the section was perhaps my favorite day on the Appalachian Trail. I hiked through the Grayson Highlands towards Mount Rogers. In May the highlands, which are populated by herds of wild ponies, are covered with blooming rhododendrons and azaleas. The sky that day was brilliant blue with patches of wispy cotton clouds dancing in the light breeze. Bright shades of pink, green, orange, blue and white filled the spaces between the prodigious gray rock formations of the highlands. Foals were in tow of many ponies and they all were completely unafraid of human contact. In fact, the ponies aim to use hiker's extremities as a salt lick. After hiking through the highlands I arrived at Thomas Knob Shelter. The two story structure lies at 5,400 ft along the ridge connecting the highlands to Mount Rogers. Shortly after arriving at the shelter dark ominous clouds covered the ridge and a thunderstorm delivered a deluge. I slept on the floor of the shelter that night.

A 2,000 ft descent down from Mount Rogers followed the next day. The trail was loaded with other hikers. As I headed around a bend in the trail, I heard a familiar voice. It was Trouble, one of my hiking companions from the previous year in Pennsylvania. Likewise, he had come to southwest Virginia to hike on the AT in May. The large community on the Appalachian Trail had become small again. At Lost Mountain shelter I found Teddy Bear, an unassuming diminutive 80 year old wielding an ultralight pack. As Theodore displayed his gear to me it became evident that he was an experienced and proficient hiker. I



Trouble

was not surprised to learn that he was already a *Triple-Crowner* and was hiking the AT for a second time. I can only hope to be able to the same at 80 years of age.

On the final day of the 260 mile section, **Day #23**, I hiked for two miles on the AT to the point where it joins the Virginia Creeper Trail. It's a rails to trails project that follows Laurel Creek and the AT for the last 14 miles of the hike to Damascus. The trail is a flat and wide path of crushed gravel that

provides for speedy miles. I arrived in Damascus in the mid-afternoon.

Damascus, "Trail Town USA," is the most hiker friendly town on the AT and home of the annual "Trail Days" event. Each May hundreds of hikers rendezvous in Damascus to celebrate the trail and thru-hiking. Speakers, musicians, vendors and a parade are featured. I made a stop at the outfitter, ate at the diner and spent a night in one of the many hostels. The section hike had been an enormous success! I took the bus to Knoxville and went to Dollywood to celebrate before heading home.

# 7. Patient Zero

When I hiked through Southern Virginia in 2019 one of the thru-hikers in Showstopper's *tramily* was named "Patient Zero." He explained to me how he was given his trail name. During his traverse of Great Smoky Mountain National Park he contracted norovirus. This highly contagious virus produces a godawful gastroenteritis with intractable vomiting and diarrhea. It can bring even the most stouthearted to their knees. Patient Zero brought it with him exiting the park into Standing Bear Hostel. The virus overwhelmed the establishment, and shut down the hostel for 10 days. Ouch...



2020 was an unforgettable year in many ways, some positive, most not.

My plan for the year was to hike the 300 mile section from Great Barrington, MA to Port Clinton, PA. That would link up hikes through Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania to Massachusetts and Vermont, leaving only significant uncompleted sections at the north and southern ends of the Appalachian Trail. Thanks to a virus, it was not to be.

Every March I travel to Lake County Florida to race my MC Scow, a 16 ft sailing dinghy, in the class Midwinter Championship regatta. Typically, 80 or more sailors from all over the country, including many professionals, attend the event. When I arrived at the sailing club that March I found JP, my friend from the sailing club in St Louis,

quarantined in a tent at the far end of the grounds. He was experiencing fever, malaise, cough and shortness of breath; he looked dreadful. JP had flown through Dallas-Fort-Worth airport 10 days previously, and his flight was delayed. He spent 3 1/2 hours in the terminal amongst international arrivals and departures, including Italy. At that time we had only heard rumors about a new epidemic that began in China and was starting to spread worldwide. Italy was one of the first countries outside China where the virus spread. For me, JP was patient zero. He eventually recovered, but in those early days COVID-19 was quite virulent and he was quite ill for several weeks.

Lois and I took a day off from the regatta and went to Disney World. That turned out to be the last day the parks were open before a prolonged shut-down. The entire country went on lock-down. Roads, malls, airports, restaurants and even the emergency department were essentially empty. My employer, Washington University, declared an emergency and prohibited employees from any travel more than 10 miles from the city. Although I made it a point to drive 11 miles away simply to confirm my freedom to do so.

Worst of all, the Appalachian Trail was “closed.” Only a few brave souls remained on the trail and completed thru-hikes that year. It was not easy. Many support services along the trail weren’t available. I heard stories of sheriffs apprehending hikers at trail heads and even of the National Park Service using helicopters to pursue hikers in the Smokies. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) refused to certify any thru-hikes that year. However, the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA)

certified the 2,000 milers. To this day I have continued support ALDHA and it's mission to support AT thru-hikers.

I spent my spare time that year watching “Wild on the Trail” hike the AT. I did start making some YouTube videos and reviewed all of my hiking gear. Since travel, sailing and hiking would be suspended for the year it was time to review my New Year's Resolutions from 2014. I still lacked a canine companion.

Adopting a dog in 2020 was nearly impossible. Animal shelters only provided adoptions on-line. This required submitting an application electronically and hoping that you would be chosen from the abundance of applications. Those not chosen were sent back to the end of the line and were required to submit another application. After several failed attempts, we found a puppy at a local residential shelter. We were looking

for a small to medium sized dog with a laid-back disposition. This one seemed to fit the bill. She was a Boston Terrier-Hound mix from a litter in the Bootheel of Missouri and looked more like a miniature beagle than anything else. I wrote an essay about hounds and how our serene home at the urban-woodlands interface would be perfect. We were chosen! Millie,



named after George and Barbara Bush's Whitehouse dog, weighed only 8 pounds when we picked her up. She didn't even make a sound for three days. She has since grown to a full fledged hound, with all the traits one would expect. She loves to hunt squirrels and chases deer grazing in the yard. (She did catch a couple of baby squirrels and brought them home as pets.) In particular she adores sailing. Consequently, 2020 was not a complete loss.



DRAFT

## 8. Greg the Wrestler

Plans were reset after COVID. Hiking in the south during April made sense, I would need to be in Georgia and Eastern Tennessee to sail anyway. The new plan was to hike 200 miles from Newfound Gap in the Smokies to Springer Mountain. For reasons still to be explained, that plan was overly ambitious. Instead, 2021 and 2022 would be spent on short excursions in and around Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

In early April I set out for the trail again. I rented a car in St Louis and drove it one way to Sevierville, about 10 miles from Gatlinburg, TN. To my surprise, after I dropped off the car, I found out that neither ride-share nor taxi were available. I had no way to get to my planned accommodations in Gatlinburg. I donned my pack, walked to the road and stuck out my thumb. Less than a half-dozen cars passed before a small sedan in a moderate state of disrepair stopped to pick me up. The charming young woman driving the vehicle offered to drive me to my hotel. The short drive was complemented by a performance of Mexican rap music from the car radio. I was dropped off at the Travel Lodge in downtown Gatlinburg after offering some gas money. The trail will provide...

The hotel was certainly not fancy, but it was cheap and located within easy walking distance to restaurants, and most importantly the outfitter. Every spring, the Baptist Church of Sevierville runs a complimentary shuttle service between Gatlinburg and Newfound Gap. The shuttle picks up hikers at the outfitter. I took the shuttle in the morning.

The National Park Service requires backpackers to pay for reservations for overnight stays within the park boundaries. These have to be made for specific locations on specific dates. Thru-hikers have slightly more flexibility but are still required to register. Since I was beginning my hike inside the park, I was required to reserve specific sites each night. The goal for my first day was Siler's Bald shelter, 12.2 miles from Newfound Gap.

The shuttle ride was enjoyable, two NOBO thru-hikers rode from Gatlinburg in the van along with me. Just after 9 am, I started the 8 mile ascent from Newfound Gap (5,046 ft) to Clingman's Dome (6,643 ft). It was pleasant but slow. My pack was loaded with a 5 day food supply in addition to cold weather gear. Patches of ice remained on the trail in the shade where the sun's warm rays could not reach. I did a road walk for the last mile, bypassing a section of the trail that I previously hiked and walked through the parking lot below the summit. Clingman's Dome is the highest point in Tennessee as well as on the entire Appalachian Trail. It is popular amongst tourists, who make the short trek from the parking lot to visit the summit. The sun was out and the area was packed with tourists stopping at the gift shop before summiting. Thru-hikers are somewhat of a curiosity for the tourists who find it mind-boggling that someone would walk from Springer Mountain, 200 miles further south.

The trail on top of the mountain is in dense coniferous forest. Compacted pine needles cover the ground and between the rocks, the trail is a soft carpet. I continued to hike along the trail, but evening was approaching and sunset was only a couple of hours away. It was becoming

obvious to me that I would be arriving at Siler's Bald after sunset. There was another closer shelter, although my reservation for the night was not there.

A park ranger passed me on the trail. He carried a pack laden with repair supplies for the bear cables installed at every shelter. An AR-15 was slung over his shoulder, used to shoot wild boar, and a park service intern was in tow. The ranger asked how I was doing. I replied that I was concerned about making it to my campsite before dark.



Greg the Wrestler

He said, "Don't worry about it. Stop at the next shelter. If anyone asks for your reservation, tell them that I said it's OK to stay there. My name is Greg."

"Oh wow, thanks so much! You have saved my tail. And by the way, you look like a wrestler to me."

Greg's eyes lit up with delight. He was a recent graduate from the University of Tennessee and was an intercollegiate wrestler. Double Spring Gap became my destination for the day and my fears of hiking and setting up camp after dark were alleviated.

The shelter at Double Spring Gap had a large camping area, a newly built privy and a reliable water source. The shelter was full and tents were scattered across the camping area. I set up my hammock next to a thru-hiker sleeping in a *bivvy*. The bivouac sack is an ultralight shelter option that only the hardiest choose. Using a *bivvy* essentially means sleeping on the ground in a waterproof sack. I also purified water using a Steripen. I had decided to give the ultraviolet light purifier a try. It was fast and convenient. After using it for some time, I would definitely take it on shorter hikes. I'm not so sure about how well it would do on a LASH or thru-hike.

In the morning I set out SOBO with a long day ahead of me. My first stop was Siler's Bald, where I found Greg again. He and the intern were repairing the bear cables, stringing up new wire with shackles and hooks. I was amazed to see that he even had a ladder that he had packed in. I was glad to have the chance to thank him again for his assistance the previous day. We had a discussion about my plan for the day. Spence Field Shelter, where my reservation was for that night, was 13.6 miles away. The intervening trail was above 5,000 feet for most of the way with numerous large climbs. I would be climbing more than 4,200 ft during the day.

He thought for a minute and then said, "Yep, you'll be climbing Thunderhead Mountain in the dark." That seemed ominous to me...

Greg passed me on the trail an hour or two later and when I arrived at Derrick Knob Shelter, he was already there

repairing cables again. I felt like I had my own personal park ranger.

The hike continued with uninterrupted trail for most of the day. I passed several areas with open space and a water source that would have been wonderful places to camp for the night, but in the Smokies camping is only allowed at designated sites. In the late afternoon I began climbing Thunderhead Mountain. I was glad to be there before dark; perhaps Greg's prediction would be inaccurate. However, the climb was monumental and sunset ensued. I finished the climb with a headlamp, passing through dark tunnels of thick rhododendrons with only a single brilliant ray of light illuminating the trail. The summit of Thunderhead Mountain was followed by Rocky Top, about a half mile later. Both sites are known for amazing vistas. However, I had no view at either location. The night was pitch black, almost as dark as my night camping on the Superior Hiking Trail. I had no idea that wide expanses and astonishing panoramas surrounded me. I did see a pair of eyes...

Alone in the woods, imagination can get the best of you. They were definitely looking right at me, but they were low to the ground. Not a predator, I assured myself. But it could be a skunk, they're nocturnal. Then, the eyes turned away and hopped off into the darkness.

I finally arrived at Spence Field Shelter and found a place to set up for the night. I was so tired all I did was hang my food on the bear cables and go to sleep. I had no dinner, only a shot of whiskey for a night cap. Deep sleep followed.

On **Day #3** I woke well after sunrise feeling at least somewhat rested. A trip to the privy and then down around the hill to the water source was followed by a warm breakfast. I eventually set off again with 11 1/2 miles to Birch Spring Campsite, my destination for the day. After a 3 mile hike along the peaks of the Smokies I arrived at Russel Field. The skies had turned dark and sinister, several other hikers and a ranger were sheltering there, expecting the rain to begin soon; the rains came without delay. The deluge lasted for just under an hour, but I stayed dry inside the shelter. When the rain abated it was time to get on the trail again, although with a late start and the rain storm, I was already several hours behind schedule.

There was a moment for celebration. I had now hiked 1,000 miles on the Appalachian Trail. I still hadn't even covered half of the trail, but the milestone was an accomplishment that made me proud.

I hiked into Mollie's Ridge in the mid-afternoon. The large double decker shelter was already filled with NOBO thru-hikers who had trudged up the trail from Fontana Dam, the southern entrance to the park, 11 miles away and almost 3,000 ft below. I was jealous at their exuberance after making such an arduous ascent. Little did I know that two years later, Bluebird would be rescued from dangerous hypothermia in that very spot.

Many tents were set up around the shelter. Hiking on to Birch Spring would mean another day's hike ending in the dark. Perhaps I should stop here. However a ridge runner, acting as a civilian member of the park service's enforcement division, was wandering around the site

checking everyone's permit. Oh drat! Staying could mean getting a citation from the hall monitor. On the back side of the shelter there is a small porch where a faint cell signal was available. I was able to call the backcountry office and discuss my predicament with the ranger on duty. She was very helpful and even though the shelter was full on the reservation list, gave me permission to stay for the night. I managed to avoid the ridge runner, timing my trip to the water source with his rounds, and had an uneventful stay.



Leaving the Smokies

The weather warmed up even more on Day #4 and the sun was beaming. The hike off the ridge and down to Fontana Dam was gratifying, although I arrived sun burned and covered in sweat. Half way down, after reviewing my headway to that point, I realized that keeping up with my planned progress had be painfully difficult and that the remaining 160+ miles to Springer Mountain would be a grueling challenge. I had a cell signal during my lunch break and arranged for a shuttle to meet me at the end of the day for a ride

into Knoxville. This would be a short section, 42 miles through Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

I expected to fly home or perhaps rent a car at the Knoxville airport to get home to St Louis. Flights were phenomenally expensive and one-way rentals were not available. I was stuck and resorted to taking the bus home. Oh boy, that was an experience: “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” on wheels.



Not wanting to be a quitter, I decided to continue hiking from Fontana Dam the following spring. I drove my own vehicle this time, and parked at the NOC. The Nantahala Outdoor Center sits at the intersection of the AT with the Nantahala river in Bryson City, NC. There are approximately 30 miles of trail from there to Fontana Dam. The NOC is a wonderful place for thru-hikers. The general store and outfitter are well stocked. A restaurant, where I hosted a family of hikers to dinner, is located next to the

river and numerous lodging choices are available. After making arrangements to leave my vehicle and spending the night, I got a shuttle to Fontana Dam to begin my hike.



Hiker Family at the NOC

I set out from the Fontana Hilton. (That's the nickname given to the "palatial" shelter.) Many NOBO thru-hikers stop there and charge up before entering the Smokies. I was heading the other way, but I still had a significant climb ahead. Going SOBO, after following the lake shore for about a mile, the trail ascends 2,000 ft up the ridge. Since it was May, the weather was warm and humid. Before long I was drenched in sweat and exhausted. It was going very slowly, as it had in the Smokies. A NOBO hiker passed and we exchanged greetings. He was struggling with the heat as well. Stickerbush, named for an entanglement with a prickly plant, was a section hiker heading into the Smokies. I informed him of my plans and suspected that we might see each other again, after I had completed my hike and recovered my car.

Dead on my feet after only 6.5 miles, I made it to Cable Gap Shelter in the mid afternoon. Cable Gap has a reputation among AT thru-hikers as the worst shelter on the entire trail. It's well earned. The structure sits down in a ravine without sunlight and it's in a state of considerate disrepair. Although MacGyver, a NOBO thru-hiker, did manage to sweep out the shelter, considerably improving the situation. The privy is located next to a small branch of the nearby stream, which creates a quagmire in which my shoe became stuck on a middle of my night trip to the bathroom.

I was hoping it would be easier on the second day. Stecoah Gap was 8.6 miles away and a campsite, part way up Cheoah Bald, was only a few miles further. I would see how far I could to that day.

The day was spent plodding along and as the day progressed, the heat and humidity increased. The grade was not too difficult but there was a steep descent into Stecoah Gap. Those two miles are known as Jacob's Ladder because it is so precipitous. After climbing down Jacob's Ladder, I made the decision to stop for the day and headed to Cabin in the Woods for the night.

Thunderstorms were predicted for mid-day on Day #3, when I planned on being on top of Cheoah Bald. That didn't seem like such a great idea. Consequently, plans changed again. Craig, the owner of the cabin, drove me back to the NOC where I picked up my car and headed to Gatlinburg. I would stay there for several days and day hike in the national park.

The drive from the NOC to Gatlinburg goes through Cherokee, NC and traverses the park on highway 441. The road crosses the ridge at Newfound Gap and it was there that I found Stickerbush with his thumb out looking for a ride into Gatlinburg. I was pleased that my prediction had come true. He and I had dinner at the Smoky Mountain Trout House that evening. During the meal, Stickerbush chose his order carefully and informed me that he had recently been diagnosed as a diabetic. Learning how he hiked and dealt with the disease turned out to be a valuable lesson.



In early August I had my annual visit with my primary doctor. Included in the routine monitoring tests was a Hemoglobin A1C. This biological marker correlates with

the average blood glucose level over time and if elevated above 6.5% is indicative of diabetes. Mine was over 9! I shouldn't have been surprised. Being in my late 60's, overweight and having a family history of diabetes along with a personal history of pre-diabetes, it was destined to be. It was now easy to figure out why the hike between Newfound Gap and Stecoah Gap had been so difficult. It was time to address the problem. Over the next few months I started on medication and lost over 40 lbs. I would be ready to hike again in the spring of 2023.

DRAFT

## 9. Smoky Bear

Over the winter I started planning for my return to the trail. I also retired. I had a new boss who dictated that all vacation would be replaced with a small reduction in required work hours. Defacto, that meant that I would not be able to take more than a week or two at a time away from work to go hiking. The decision was easy. There would now be time to travel, sail and continue to hike on the Appalachian Trail. The bonus was that I would be provided with free time, allowing me to take on additional projects, like writing, not that I was skilled at all.

There were three choices where to return to the trail: north, central or south. I decided that it was time to hike with the bubble and start south. I would begin my section hike at Springer Mountain in early March with all the hopeful NOBO thru-hikers. For once, I would be getting on trail with other hikers who had yet to develop their trail legs.

But first, it was time to reconnect with the hiker community. ALDHA sponsors hiker get-togethers in January each year. I attended the Southern Ruck at Laughing Heart Hostel in Hot Springs, NC. Thirty or forty hikers got together for fellowship and to help orient thru-hiker hopefuls to the trail. At the pack shakedown those planning a thru-hike got out their gear which the experts evaluated. Yolo, who was planning to start his thru-hike immediately after the ruck, brought out a pack full of DIY gear. His pack was interesting, but quite heavy. That's where I met Miss Janet. She travels along the Appalachian

Trail in her van each year supporting thru-hikers. She is as knowledgeable as even the most seasoned hiker about the AT and is the quintessential trail angel. She would be ever-present during my hikes on the southern Appalachian Trail. Also, while at the ruck, we did a 6 mile hike on the AT in the snow. I hiked with two of my bunkmates, Rip and Star, amongst others. Rip is a trail maintainer and hikes with tools. Star thru-hiked the AT long ago with an external frame pack and analogous gear.



Rip-Van-Winkle and Southern Star

In early March, after racing in the annual midwinter championship regatta in Florida, I drove JP's truck with a double decker sailboat trailer in tow to the sailing club at Lake Lanier, north of Atlanta. I left the rig there and got a ride from a friend to Dawson, GA on the other side of the lake. Amicalola Falls State Park, where the approach trail begins, is only 20 miles away. A shuttle to the park and

then to Springer Mountain delivered me to the trailhead. On the afternoon of March 12<sup>th</sup> I began my NOBO trek in the *bubble*.

It was cold and raining. That wasn't a surprise. The mountains of North Georgia are infamous for miserable weather as thru-hikers begin their journeys northward to Maine. It seemed strange to me that Yolo and other hikers who had started in January and February had better weather. I would find the weather pattern habitual during my hike. A cold front was passing through bringing rain and would be followed by plummeting temperatures.

My first stop was Stover Creek Shelter, only a couple of miles from the trailhead. There were lots of thru-hikers there, although most had only covered the few miles from Springer Mountain to the shelter, a few had also hiked the 8 miles of approach trail from Amicalola Falls. The shelter was relatively full and many tents were pitched on the surrounding grounds. One couple, who I would later learn to be Chuck and Emily, were settled down in the back of the shelter. I moved on to find a better spot to camp. The trail continued along Stover Creek and a mile further, I found a campsite with lots of open level ground. I pitched my tent and settled down for the night, alone in the rain.

This was the first time I had pitched a tent on the AT. I had always I slept in hammock; it was convenient and comfortable. I made the change to a tent, expecting colder weather and to save a couple of ounces of pack weight. The Durston X-Mid 1P fit the bill. It kept me warm in the cold weather and I did save a couple of ounces.

When I woke early in the morning the rain had finally abated. It had continued into the night and my sleep had only been interrupted by the sound of a few falling branches, that prompted me to rise and search around the campsite for a roaming bear or some other creature. I found none. I did find myself examining why I had elected to spend time alone in the cold, dark, damp and dismal woods.

My first full day was spent hiking the 10.5 miles to Devils Kitchen. I met Struggle Bus, a veteran hiking with his PTSD support dog, and Sleepwalker, a newly retired Long Island firefighter who was in the tower on 9/11. I would meet many other veterans and first responders. With reverence, I am with them all.

As anticipated, after the front came through the temperatures fell. It was well below freezing overnight at Devils Kitchen, but I stayed warm albeit I slept donned in several layers of clothes. On my second full **Day #2**, I set out again.

I was beginning to enjoy being on the trail again. The sun was out and the lack of leaves on the trees allowed for stunning views out over the Georgia mountains. Other hikers were around and we were all starting to get to know each other. I passed one going SOBO; it was Full Throttle. He left a religious blessing that hit a bullseye on the spiritual countenance of the trail. I felt truly blessed.

With the temperatures continuing to fall and expecting another night of sub-freezing temperatures, I decided to head for a hostel that night. Above the Clouds Hostel is

near Woody Gap, and I headed there. It was packed, but I managed to obtain one of the last available bunks in one of the out buildings.

The hostel was a verifiable haven for thru-hikers. At the entrance an outer room had space for dirty footwear, packs and trekking poles. Behind was a room containing the store with sundries for short term resupply. In addition to sleeping quarters, laundry and showers, there was an open kitchen, dining area and a living room. Several out buildings contain additional bunks; I was relegated to one of these.



Above the Clouds

I had yet to get to know anyone staying at the hostel, although these hikers would be my companions for the next 200 miles of trail. Four of us were in one bunk house. Chuck and I were in the top bunks. Reneé and Margaret were in the lower. (All were yet to get trail names, except Puffin.) I wondered if I was the last to get a bunk; I wasn't.

Chuck and Emily got the last bunks. Emily was in another bunk house.

Reneé was quiet and withdrawn. Margaret, a retired nurse from Nashville, expressed her concern. Reneé was young, alone and attempting to hike the trail with gear that weighed almost 50 lbs! We were sure he would quit, or perhaps even worse. Later in the evening a trail angel (a woman and her daughter from North Carolina) showed up with a car and ferried Reneé off to an outfitter to obtain new equipment. I would see him later.

When Chuck was changing his shirt a roadmap of large surgical scars was revealed. He had obviously undergone major abdominal surgery. I recognized the handiwork of surgeons striving to save his life.

“Holy crap, Chuck, what happened to you?” I asked. He replied, “I was shot with a high power rifle when I was a kid.” Indifferently and in a matter-of-fact voice he explained most of the story. He had become addicted to heroin when he was 13. He was a daily user for several years until he was “accidentally” gut shot with a rifle. On the brink of death, he underwent surgery at a trauma center and ultimately recovered. He was now working as a surveyor and had taken time off to thru-hike the AT with his girlfriend Emily. Yes, the trail can be a place to address your demons and start anew.

The hostel staff offered slack-packing to hikers staying for the night. Free shuttles would run to Woody Gap, Jarrard Gap and Neels Gap. I chose the latter and hiked from Neels Gap back to the hostel on **Day #4**.

Mountain Crossings at Neels Gap is an astonishing facility. The store stocks all essentials for backpacking and there's a small hostel as well. The stone structure overlooks the valley below from the patio. I set off SOBO across the road and directly began the climb to the summit of Blood Mountain. The sky was clear and the sun was out making the experience enjoyable. At one point the trail traversed a rock face and I couldn't find a white blaze for the life of me. I immediately realized I was off trail and stopped. A hiker off in the distance padded by, and I realized that the trail was there. I was greeted by astonishing views from the summit.

A stone shelter sits on top of the mountain. When I arrived two other people were there. The first was Margaret. She was hiking north from Jarrard Gap and had just reached the shelter. The other was "Fearless," she had been there for several days. Fearless had injured a knee while hiking and instead of making the descent to Neels Gap, elected to camp on top of Blood Mountain until she recovered. The three of us talked and while standing on the front steps of the shelter, Margaret gave Fearless words of encouragement that were truly inspiring.

Fearless exclaimed, "That was the bright spot of my day!"

And hence, a trail name was conceived. From that moment on Margaret was known as "Bright Spot."

Bright Spot continued her hike with the NOBO descent off Blood Mountain to Neels Gap, I headed SOBO and Fearless stayed on top greeting other hikers at the summit. The remainder of my 11 mile return to Woody Gap finished just

before 6 pm. When I returned to Above the Clouds there was barbecue that had been delivered from a local smoker.

On **Day #4** I returned to Neels Gap and continued hiking NOBO. There's a camping spot at the top of the hill above Mountain Crossings and when I arrived there Bright Spot was there setting off on her hike for the day. The weather, which had been nice for the last two days, was going to turn awful. Another cold front, bringing rain and falling temperatures was coming. Bright Spot's husband Ray was driving from Nashville to take her off trail to avoid the rain. I managed to get invited to a ride off trail with them. At Tesnatee Gap, Ray was waiting along with King Tut, who had set up trail magic. Multiple thru-hikers were sitting in folding chairs enjoying a cooked meal along with drinks and snacks galore. It was a feast that rivaled the best! We all filled our bellies and then drove to Blairsville, GA for shelter from the coming storm.

After spending a day in a hotel while the rain poured down outside, we returned to Tesnatee Gap. The temperature had dropped precipitously and the wind, which accelerated up the mountain side into the gap, was howling. I almost got right back into Ray's truck. However, the sun was rising and it might begin to warm. The 500 ft climb out of the gap was into a glistening fairy land. The trees were covered with hoarfrost, lit from behind by the rising sun. It was truly magical. The remainder of the day was spent hiking through several gaps and along the ridge to Low Gap Shelter. Bright Spot and I set up tents in an sheltered area to stay warmer. The late afternoon and evening were spent cooking dinner and in fellowship. Trail Jesus, who indeed looked like the messiah, earned his trail name when he

saved another hiker from a near death hypothermia event on top of Blood Mountain several days previously. He accused me of being a thru-hiker, claiming that I had become a member of the *tramily*. The Young Swede was there, wanting to be sure that he would not be confused another older Swedish hiker. Bluebird was there too. She set up her Durston X-Mid Pro a little further down the hill. Bluebird, donned in a bright blue jacket and blue hiking pants, earned her name from Miss Janet on the day she started the trail. Miss Janet exclaimed, “You look just like a mountain bluebird.” The name stuck.

We all hiked out of Low Gap in the morning after temperatures fell well below 20 degrees overnight. It stayed cold, and there was ice along the trail for the entire



Sunrise at Blue Mountain

day. Most stopped at Blue Mountain Shelter, after only 7 1/2 miles. The shelter was up on top of a ridge with great views, convenient water and numerous open tenting spots. The sunrise in the morning was magnificent.

**Day #8** was another short day. I continued to hike with Bright Spot and Bluebird. The Cheese Factory is a campsite located at a spot where cheese was made eons ago. The factory is long gone, but there is now a lovely open space with nice views and convenient water. We elected to stop there for the night and climb Tray Mountain in the morning. I set up my tent underneath some rhododendron bushes and was remarkably comfortable. Lots of other

hikers were there too, including René. I hadn't seen him since Above the Clouds Hostel, where he looked so browbeaten. He was a changed man; outgoing, jovial and enjoying his thru-hike tremendously with up-to-date light weight gear. Yeah! Many of us sat around a campfire that evening.



Campfire at the Cheese Factory

**Day #9** ended at Deep Gap Shelter after 9 1/2 miles and two big climbs. Trail magic was at a road crossing again, this time with Smoky Bear. The back of his rickety old Jeep was filled with fresh fruit, drinks and snacks galore. Each hiker chose an item or two from the booty before continuing on for the day. Smoky made it a point to give us his number in case we needed help later. I slept in the shelter that night. The forecast was for rain overnight and into the morning. I was glad I did.

It was only a few miles from Deep Gap to the road crossing near Hiawassee, GA. The rain came down in earnest and I arrived soaking wet from head to toe. We had reservations at Around the Bend Hostel for the night and picked up a quick shuttle down the road to the hostel. The hostel was a great place to dry out, do laundry, get short-term resupply and recuperate. A small outfitter is located in a shed out front. I bought a wool bag liner and a foam pad. These turned out to be great selections for more comfortable nights, especially in the cold and on shelter floors.

The next two days were spent hiking out of Georgia and into North Carolina. It felt great to be able to check off another state on the completed list. A storm was expected, so staying in the shelter at Standing Indian was desirable. However, the shelter was full. It did have a covered area in front and Chuck, Emily, Bright Spot and I all bedded down on the dirt floor underneath the extended roof. The storm hit at about 4 am. There was a downpour for several hours with winds that rose to over 40 mph. The rain went sideways and into the shelter. The four of us on the dirt floor had no escape from the rain and were completely drenched. The image of Chuck standing up trying to collect his belongings, only visible as bolts of lightning lit up the dark shelter, is burned into my mind. In the morning, we had all given up. We hiked a mile back to Deep Gap to find a way to dry out and recover. I was ready to quit and go home. The rain and cold had been nearly unbearable and going home to a nice warm bed was very enticing. Bright Spot called Smoky Bear. He drove to the gap and took us all back to Hiawassee to for an overnight stay. During the drive Smoky Bear talked me into staying on trail. I'm glad I did.

The next morning he shuttled us back to Deep Gap and we were all hiking again. And, there was an added bonus, the weather was better. It was a considerable climb up Standing Indian Mountain, but there were many switchbacks and the trail was wide and smooth. After hiking for two weeks I was beginning to get some trail legs and the ascent was truly enjoyable. The remainder of **Day #14** was spent hiking to Carter Gap Shelter where I would find everyone. Bright Spot, Chuck (“Survey”), Emily, and Bluebird along with a host of other thru-hikers were camped in and around the shelter, which sat overlooking the valley below. I did not see the ones who were inside the shelter at Standing Indian when the storm from hell hit overnight. Gary, Sam I Am and the rest were a day ahead.

I hiked out of Carter Gap with Bright Spot, Bluebird, Chuck and Emily, anticipating the legendary climb up Albert Mountain during the day. There’s an inclement weather bypass at Bearpen Gap that avoids the 1/2 mile climb straight up the rocky and moderately technical trail. The weather was clear, so up we climbed. A fire tower sits on top of Albert Mountain with amazing views to the east. The number “100” is etched on the side of that tower. We had all hiked 100 miles from Springer Mountain! Making it to that first 100 mile marker was monumental, although there are many more milestones on the way to Katahdin.

Albert Mountain was followed by a night at Long Branch Shelter and a nero into Franklin, NC. The trail north of Franklin was closed for a Forest Service prescribed burn, so a day was spent in town after a short day hike. Franklin was filled with other hikers waiting to get back on trail. Walking around town and going to Outdoor 76, the



Prescribed Burn

outfitter, felt like being at home. I was constantly running into someone I knew. Iron Mike was there and joined our group. He would end up finishing the trail in December with Bluebird.

Out of Franklin, the hike was through the burn area. Smoke was still in the air along with the acrid smell of smoldering underbrush. I stopped at a campsite for the evening.

On **Day #19**, when I woke in the morning my stomach was upset. That achy nauseous feeling, the one you get after eating hot wings and drinking tequila all night was there. It took a while to realize that my umbilical hernia was stuck out and I was potentially in big trouble. I was miles from a trailhead and many more from medical help. Oh crap... I started to massage the area, which caused great pain, trying to reduce the hernia. Damn, I knew I should have gotten that thing fixed. Knees up, deep breaths, and gently but firmly push while laying in the tent on my back. I would really be miserable trying to hike out with an incarcerated hernia. Finally, after 20 or 30 minutes I felt a "pop"; it was back in place and the pain began to resolve. I dodged that bullet, for now. I got it fixed that summer.

More rain was on the way, so the goal for the day was Cold Spring Shelter. Unfortunately, it's a tiny shelter with only room for 6. Striving to arrive early, my pace increased. During the last 1/2 mile I was passed by "Itchy Feet," a retired Army officer in amazing physical condition. As he passed he quipped, "It's a race!" The two of us got the last spots in the shelter for the night. And as predicted, the rain came in overnight.



Cold Spring Shelter

Bluebird spent an extra day in Franklin. So we slowed our pace, hoping she would catch up. April 1st (**Day #20**) was a short day that included climbing Wesser Bald in howling winds. The view was amazing, but I held on for dear life climbing the tower. The bald was the third mountain top since Franklin with sparse vegetation, also including Siler

Bald and Wayah Bald. The wind had also taken its toll. Numerous blow downs obstructed the trail and often required some gymnastics to negotiate a way under, around or over. A large tree was downed at the Wayah Bald Shelter. Luckily, no one was camped underneath. Renegade, who I would meet later in the Smokies, was camped only a few feet away.

After a night at Wesser Bald Shelter, the hike was mostly downhill and often steeply so, to the NOC. The Nantahalla Outdoor Center was familiar to me since I stayed there the previous year. Bright Spot, Bluebird and I arrived in the early afternoon. It was a gorgeous day, and curious tourists

all wanted to learn about hiking the trail. Resting thru-hikers were on the shore of the river, sunning themselves. After stopping at the store and outfitter, we crossed the river and walked up the hill to the Dogwood Motel for a night in a comfortable bed.



Nantahalla River at the NOC

I had feared the 3,000 ft climb out of the NOC up Cheoah Bald since I began hiking in the Smokies. Things were different when I set out from the motel in the morning. I had lost weight, gotten control of my health and had been on trail for three weeks. It was time to get trail legs. Rain showers intermittently materialized during the ascent and

to my joy, at the top of the climb, I had hiked 6 miles in only 4 hours. When I set out from Springer Mountain I vowed to become stronger and faster, I had succeeded. Sassafras Gap Shelter, which is located just south of the Cheoah Bald Summit, was my home for the night. I celebrated my new trail legs with my companions.

On **Day #23**, Bright Spot, Bluebird and I hiked over the top of Cheoah Bald and beheld amazing views as the fog cleared. At Stecoah Gap we found trail magic and shuttled to the Tiny Cabin in the Woods for the night. Since I had connected to my previous hikes in the Smokies, I would be jumping ahead to Newfound Gap. It was time to say goodbye to my hiking companions. Bluebird would finish the trail in December. Bright Spot suffered a back injury and would be off trail in only a few days. I shuttled to Cherokee, NC to finish the Smokies after a *zero*.

There was a little breakfast place attached to a gas station across from the hotel in Cherokee that appeared to be frequented by the local blue collar aristocracy, and that's a good sign. So, **Day #25** began with a delicious and filling traditional American breakfast of pancakes, bacon, eggs and orange juice at Mabel's Kitchen. The road back into the national park was just across the river, and I was soon standing there with my thumb out along with a handmade sign reading, "Newfound GAP." The third vehicle that passed me stopped, gave me a lift, and I was on my way back to the trail! Almost anyone who has visited Smokey Mountain National Park has been to Newfound Gap, the only road crossing the ridge along the Tennessee-Carolina border. The large parking lot is typically full of park visitors, many curious about the AT hikers. But it was still

early and the lot was almost empty. I did make the acquaintance of one family before setting off on the AT. It was more than 10 miles to Pecks Corner, where I would be spending the night.

Ridge walking in the Smokies is a spectacular experience. The 4 miles of trail along the AT to Charlie's Bunion are frequently travelled and well groomed. Much of the elevation is over 6,000 ft and the aroma of pine drifts through the cool crisp mountain air. Views can be limited however, due to the cloak of trees covering the ridge. Many day hikers were hiking to Charlie's Bunion, where the view is legendary. The vistas there were as promised, even on a cloudy day. The premier viewing spot was, however, occupied by day hikers undertaking a long sit-down.



Muggles ensconced upon Charlie's Bunion

I still had at least another 4 hours of hiking ahead of me, so it was time to move along. To my dismay, the quality of the trail deteriorated rapidly after leaving Charlie's Bunion, where day hikers all turn around to head back to Newfound Gap. Almost everyone continuing on was going the additional 30 miles to Davenport Gap at the north end of the park. It wasn't long until I came upon a backpacker stopped for a rest at the side of the trail. Sugar Bear was hiking through the park companionless and seemed in need of a friend. So we hiked together for a while. Anxious to tell me his life story, he proudly accounted his duties as a security guard at Augusta for the Masters each year. He was also downright proud of his ability to snore loudly for some strange reason.

My pace kept up nicely and soon I left Sugar Bear behind, expecting him to catch me again at Peck's Corner. The shelter is actually about a half mile down another trail off the AT, but in the Smokies you have to stay at the shelter. Down I went!

The shelter is fancy by AT standards, it's a double decker log shelter with a porch, a nearby spring and a privy. It was already beginning to fill up in the late afternoon. The weather was predicted to get bad again with rain and falling temperatures in the forecast for the next few days. I found a nice open spot against the wall on the upper deck to lay out my sleep system. To my surprise I recognized some of the other hikers. Bringing back memories of the storm from hell, "Sam I Am" was set up against the back wall.

I hailed, "Hey, how are you?"

He replied, “Oh man, I’m so sorry we had no room for you at Standing Indian. We were packed in so tight.”

I reassured him, “We made out OK and besides, I managed to catch up and see you again!”

It wasn’t long before Sugar Bear rolled into the shelter. He was very happy to see me again and quickly located my sleeping spot. He set up his sleep system right next to mine, strangely close given the space that was still open on the floor. When darkness fell, the temperature did too. It wasn’t long until everyone was in their sleeping bag trying to keep warm. Sleep soon followed; we were all tired after hiking more than 10 miles in the Smokies with full packs. But it didn’t last long. As he had boasted, Sugar Bear was a loud snorer. Loud is not the best verbiage to describe the sounds that emerged from Sugar Bear, with his head only a few inches from mine. Deafening, thunderous, head-splitting, and cacophonous roars reverberated through the shelter on and off all night. Each out-burst was followed by a round of subdued snickering from all of the other hikers in the shelter, knowing that Sugar Bear had chosen me as his companion. To make matters worse, each out-burst was accompanied by a scoot in my direction. Before long I was pinned up against the wall, being spooned by an amorous freight train. Also, when I woke in the morning I had three socks in my sleeping bag. The extra belonged to Sugar Bear. To this day, I have no idea how it got there...

I woke before sunrise on **Day #26**, ready to move out early and escape the clutches of my newly found friend. I was off my sleeping pad and packing in a nanosecond. I boiled water for coffee and ate Pop-Tarts for breakfast before

setting out up the side trail back to the AT as the sun rose. Most of the shelter dwellers were just waking at the time.

I had a big day ahead of me. In addition to trying to distance myself from Peck's Corner as much as possible, I had two shelters ahead to stop at. One was only about 7 miles ahead and the other more than 13 miles. One too near and one too far; it was to be a shelter too far. Good thing I started early. I also was able to hike (a little) before the rain began, which it did in earnest shortly after I was back on the AT. I don't remember too much about the hike that day, just that it was cold, windy and raining heavily. I donned my rain jacket and broke out my ultralight umbrella to try to stay somewhat dry. That effort would fail completely before reaching Cosby Knob Shelter. Two faster hikers passed me along the trail. As they passed, one quipped, "Embrace the suck." That's some well known hiker wisdom! Another is the answer to the question, "What to you do when it rains?" Answer, "Get wet..."

Cosby Knob was packed with other hikers seeking shelter from the rain and cold. (Many had only hiked 7 miles that day.) I managed to squeeze into a spot on the bottom level, with "Sam I Am" at my feet. (Sugar Bear arrived an hour later and lacking room in the shelter, set up his hammock down the hill.) I met many more new friends at the shelter, including Renegade, who was section hiking with his daughter. They were from Clarksville, TN and offered me a ride out of Standing Bear, my destination the next day. During the night my sleeping pad developed an air leak. I woke up every few hours with it deflated and blew it up again. My decision was made. I would take Renegade up on that offer.

More than anything, I wanted to be done with the Smokies. The park is a favorite for many hikers, but not so much for me. The rules, reservation system and lack of nearby amenities make it bothersome. The weather can also change quickly, getting remarkably bad. Bluebird entered the park at Fontana Dam while I was at Peck's Corner. The storm hit her and temperatures fell to below freezing as she hiked the 11 miles up to Mollies Ridge. She arrived at the shelter hypothermic and would possibly have died if it were not for another thru-hiker, another trail angel.

*Footnote: One year later Sugar Bear posted a video of his next AT section hike, continuing on from Standing Bear. A couple of days into the hike, while on top of Max Patch, he developed an acute coronary syndrome. He hiked four miles out of the mountains with significant symptoms, including a heart rate of 30 beats per minute. (This is common with an inferior myocardial infarction.) Yes, Sugar Bear had a heart attack on the AT! After getting off trail, luckily alive, he was taken to the hospital and had emergency coronary bypass surgery. I thank the trail angels for looking after him that day...*

I left Cosby Knob just after sunrise on **Day #27**. The only dry gear I had was that in which I had slept. Everything else was wet and haphazardly crammed into my pack for the 10 mile downhill slog to Davenport Gap. The rain had diminished, so I actually anticipated an easy hike. Ha, not so much! After an hour or so, the rain returned in earnest and the trail condition deteriorated. Just like my first day from Bear's Den in 2015, the trail became a river of flowing

water. Underneath that river lay a morass of slippery rocks, roots and mud. I fell twice that day, thankfully with only minimal injuries to my pride and physical state.

Renegade and his daughter caught up with me just before reaching Davenport Gap. The three of us exited the park together. A drop box for park permits was located there. I did not insert mine, since I had purchased it earlier and hiking at a slower pace than I anticipated, the permit had already expired. Renegade followed suit.

It's slightly more than a mile from Davenport Gap to Standing Bear hostel. In that mile we crossed a river, hiked by a waterfall, crossed I-40 and met Chris. He was sitting under the highway bridge in an attempt to stay dry. I actually thought he was homeless. His pack was way too small for a thru-hiker. But Renegade, the generous soul that he was, inquired if he might need a ride. The answer was, "Thank you and yes!" It turns out that Chris had just completed a FKT of the Benton MacKaye Trail. He started at Springer Mountain a little over 7 days previously and hiked the 287.6 miles in record time. He averaged more than 40 miles a day, hiking for 20 hours a day! So the four of us left the trail with Renegade at the wheel. Chris got dropped off at a car rental, so he could return to his home in North Carolina and I was deposited at the Nashville airport, from where I would fly home the next morning.



One of the reasons that I headed home from Standing Bear was that I had a sailboat regatta to attend. When I was hiking with Bright Spot and Bluebird, I told them that I

anticipated doing very well in that regatta. In addition to losing weight while hiking, I had gained strength and mobility. Being lighter, stronger and more nimble is much faster when racing small sailboats. I was looking forward to testing my theory.

I flew to Atlanta and arrived back at Lake Lanier within a week. To my surprise, the sailing club was a hot mess. A storm had passed through and the clubhouse was severely damaged. The roof was torn off and many of the windows were broken out. There was also some damage to the boats. Another boat had been blown off it's trailer and hit mine. Luckily the damage was minimal and would not keep me from racing. And then it became clear. The storm that ravaged the sailing club was the same storm that had deluged us at Standing Indian Shelter, almost sending me home early from the trial. It was a real doozy.

On Saturday we left the dock and sailed out onto the lake for racing. The wind was light, advantage to those weighing less. I went out early and sailed around Chattahoochee Bay to check out the wind. I found a geographic wind shift on the right side of the course; that would be the way to go! And sure enough, I was quickly in the lead after the start and won the first race handily. Mission accomplished...

A new sailor was at the regatta. Jan was from Denmark, recently moved to the US and started racing our class of boats. He was a skilled sailor, having raced Optimist Prams, a small training boat that is popular worldwide, while growing up in Copenhagen. Jan sailed along side of me after the race and had all sorts of questions about making

our boats fast when the wind was light. The next day, the wind was up. Jan was bigger and stronger than most of us and won every race that day by considerable margins. I found out later that Jan's best friend and training partner in Copenhagen was the Optimist world champion. Yikes! Jan would become a great friend and joined the ranks of the many exceptional sailboat racers that I have the honor to compete against.



## 10. Music Man

Every year, ALDHA hosts their annual Gathering where long distance hikers convene to reminisce about thru-hikes and plan for new adventures. I attended in anticipation of going back to the trail in Tennessee between the Smokies and Damascus, VA. In 2023 the Gathering was held in Abingdon, VA which is 15 miles west of Damascus. The Gathering was truly enjoyable. I met many veterans of the trail and attended several seminars. At a writing session I met Music Man, Dave Chandler. He is a former narcotics addict who renewed his life on a thru-hike in 2020. I received an autographed copy of his book, Extraordinary Journey, about the experience. His account of dealing with the restrictions on trail during COVID and recovering from addiction is riveting. His encouragement was instrumental to my writing.

The Virginia Creeper Trail connects Abingdon and Damascus before continuing east along the Appalachian Trail. I did a day hike on the trail before the conference



Yolo Volunteering

and ALDHA sponsored a volunteer event the day after. I helped paint a pavilion along the trail with several others, including Yolo. He attended the Ruck with me the previous January and finished his thru-hike in August. Then he biked home to Ohio from Maine.



Just before Christmas in 2003 I suffered a tri-malleolar ankle fracture when I slipped and fell on the ice. I spent Christmas in the hospital getting a surgical repair and in recovery at home. Like most patients after significant orthopedic surgery, I took a narcotic pain medication afterwards. I needed it; the fracture hurt like hell. Several weeks later I was still taking the narcotic while I was visiting my daughter in Chicago. That morning I decided that it was time for me to stop taking the pain medication and for the first time since surgery, I went without the narcotic. At noon time I was curled up on the couch shivering with chills and abdominal discomfort. My mind said to me, “I feel terrible, I should take a Vicodin.” YIKES! Thank God that I was able to recognize the symptoms of narcotics withdrawal. I

immediately found the bottle of pills and flushed them down the toilet. I was miserable for the remainder of the day but felt better the next morning. Without realizing that I was in withdrawal I would have been on my way to narcotics addiction. I was blessed that day. Untold others are not so fortunate.



After the Gathering I headed to Boots Off Hostel, in Hampton, TN at the south end of Lake Watauga. SOBO thru-hikers and flip-floppers were working their way along the AT through the south. I met many including Holly the Carnivore Hiker, who I passed on trail and then met back at the hostel. She was a flip-flopper who has a unique YouTube channel featuring a carnivore diet, the Bible and backpacking. I told her that I hadn't seen her channel, she replied that she suspected that she was being shadow banned. Oh my...

My approach to hiking out of Boots Off Hostel was unique too. I shuttled north on the trail to a road crossing at the north end of the lake. From there I did a two day overnight hike into Damascus. I covered about 11 miles a day and arrived into Damascus in the afternoon on **Day #2**. Visiting Trail Town USA again brought back great memories from 2019. I ate at the diner again and visited the outfitter before shuttling back to the hostel. Oh yeah, I also had a homemade ice cream cone!

Back at the hostel, there was fellowship with the SOBO's and flip-floppers in front of the campfire. That was splendid on a cool fall evening. The next day I decided that

I would take advantage of an opportunity offered at the hostel. Instead of hiking on the AT along Watauga Lake, I would kayak the length of the lake. I shuttled to the north end of the lake and spent the day paddling back to the hostel. *Aquablazing* is a favorite of thru-hikers and the experience was delightful for me also. Calm waters and the warm sun made paddling easy.



Aquablazing on Watauga Lake

It was time to go home. I had hiked well over 200 miles during the year and made friends with NOBO's, SOBO's and flip-floppers. 2023 was a complete success! Only a little more than 180 miles from Standing Bear to Boots of Hostel remained in the south for me to complete. After that, it would be on to the Mid-Atlantic states, then New Hampshire and Maine.



# 11. Unicoi Steve

Over the winter I began to realize that time for me to complete the trail was running out. There were still over 1,000 miles to hike and I was getting older as each year passed. In addition, between sailing and vacationing, there was less time to hike any kind of LASH. The plan was to finish up the south in March and April of 2024; then move north over the summer. Gary, who I hiked with the previous spring, was going to be hiking in Tennessee in the spring, so I headed to the trail hoping to find a hiking partner.

I drove to Erwin, TN and parked at Uncle Johnny's Hostel. Gary was there waiting for me. Uncle Johnny's is an interesting place. Describing the facility is challenging. An ordinary person would probably describe it as ramshackle motel, but to hiker trash it's Shangra-La. The hiker store is well stocked and there's an outdoor fire pit for socializing. Camping spots, hammock hanging spots, a bunk house, a shower house and several cabins are on the premises. I chose a cabin, hoping to get a better night's sleep before heading out onto the trail in the morning. It was a cold night; the warm cabin was cozy.

Gary and I debated our route for the next few days. He had to return home in less than a week and I was just getting on trail with little training. Accordingly, we chose to shuttle 36 miles up the trail to Carver's Gap, and start our hike back to Uncle Johnny's hiking over Roan High Knob. Gary had a shuttle driver he had been using, and he arrived at 9 am ready to get us on our way.

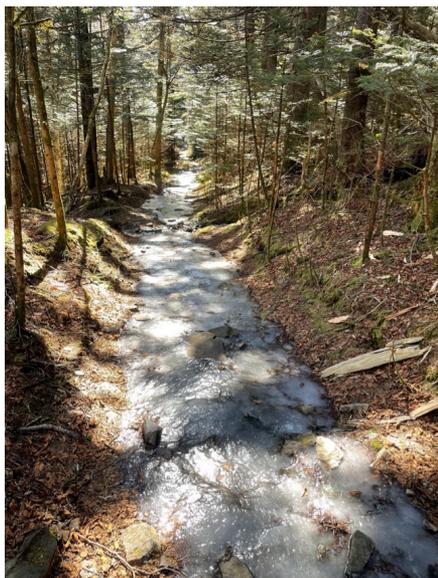


Uncle Johnny's

Every time I section hike I wonder if and when I'll find a trail angel. As Unicoi Steve drove us to the trail, he talked about how he became a shuttle driver and his motivation for assisting AT hikers. We stopped for coffee in Erwin and afterwards headed up to Carver's Gap in his squeaky clean car. I realized that I'd be using his services frequently while hiking in Tennessee; I had found my trail angel. It didn't take long, and I didn't have to look hard.

Carver's Gap sits on the Tennessee-North Carolina border next to a bald at 5,500 ft. When we arrived, the sun was out, but the wind was howling and the temperature was near freezing. Yikes! Undaunted, Gary and I donned our packs and headed off SOBO. We climbed Roan Mountain over the first mile and a half. The trail was well groomed but large patches of ice covered a significant portion of the trail, requiring detours along the side of the trail. Roan High Knob Shelter is the highest on the entire AT. We would hike to the next shelter to get out of the cold.

Shortly after Roan High Knob, the trail passes through Cloudland, the site of a large 19th century resort hotel.



Trail Ice on Roan High Knob

Only ruins remain but the area is beautiful with an open grassy area surrounded by a pine forest. It sports gorgeous views that look off into North Carolina.

Our shelter for the night was 8 miles away and almost 2,000 ft down, so we got back underway. After a few miles of stepping down off rocks onto the descending trail, I began to feel pain in my inner thighs with each step.

The pace slowed but the pain did not abate. I hobbled into the shelter near dusk after frequent rest stops hoping for improvement that did not come. That night I woke almost hourly with cramps in my thighs that required stretching and massage to abate the enormous pain. What the hell! In almost of decade of hiking, I had never experienced any significant injury. Yet, there I was wondering if I would be able to make it back to Uncle Johnny's, just twenty-six miles away.

On day #2 of the hike, Gary and I set off on the mostly downhill trail towards Uncle Johnny's. The trail was clear and the hiking was relatively easy, however every step continued to bring pain and agony. Six miles into the hike, which was originally planned to be about 12 miles, a call

was made to Unicoi Steve to take us off trail at the next road crossing. He met us there and my hike was over.

Gary and I spent a couple days exploring the area and we spent one night at Lady Di's in Damascus. Her hostel is one of the best on the entire trail. She serves an amazing breakfast made with eggs from her own chickens, who are diligently guarded by a diabolical attack rooster. Duke, Lady Di's golden retriever, was always there to console.

After a two day rest, we drove back to the trailhead and I I dropped Gary off to hike the 20 miles from Uncle Johnny's to the Iron Mountain trailhead. When I stepped out of the car, I wanted to put on my pack and join him for those few days. However, the intense pain in my inner thighs continued just stepping out of the car. I needed more rest... The section was over and I headed home.



I was now facing a new challenge; I was injured. In retrospect, it was surprising that over 9 years and 1,200+ miles of section hiking, that I had yet to deal with serious injury. But now, that serious injury had arrived. Stepping down continued to bring intense pain in my quadriceps, the vastus medialis to be more precise, for many months. Efforts to rest, recover and then re-train failed for over a year and a half.

I spent a lot of time considering why the injury happened. There were several options to consider: advancing age,

lack of training, and finally, effects of medication. Age and training were definitely issues, but not new ones. The possibility that medication effects was very real and potentially one that I could address. Since being diagnosed as a diabetic several years ago, I had been on a GLP-1 agonist. Due to shortages from the enormous demand for weight loss medication, I was forced to switch to a new formula (Trulicity) and at a much higher dose. The result was loss of significant muscle mass, particularly in my normally very strong quadriceps. Switching back to Ozempic, and at a much lower dose hopefully would address the issue. Only time would tell.



I spent the summer resting and hoping that my legs would get stronger again. The next test would be a major regatta, although I consider any regatta with 50+ boats to be “major.”

My home club, Carlyle Sailing Association, is located on Carlyle Reservoir in south central Illinois just under an hour east of St Louis. The navigable portion of the lake is 3 miles wide and more that 7 miles long. The sailing club has remarkable facilities and hosts at least one national championship regatta each year. In 2024, one of these would be the MC Scow Class Masters National Championship. Fifty-nine skippers from around the country came to race with us. We had lots of wind, in fact too much. After fantastic racing on day #1, the wind speed increased to over 35 mph on day #2, bringing 3-4 foot rollers sweeping down the lake with spray jumping off the tops of the waves. Day #3 was predicted to be no better

and racing was cancelled. This was a first, since the reason for the weather was that we were in the outskirts of Hurricane Helene. At CSA, racing had never before been cancelled for a hurricane.

Little did I know what damage this hurricane would bring to the southernmost 500 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Western North Carolina was hit particularly hard, as were the trail towns of Damascus, VA and Erwin, TN. In Damascus, Laurel Creek swelled over its banks and flooded the entire downtown. It also destroyed the Virginia Creeper Trail, which would take more than a year to rebuild. The damage in Erwin was even worse. The Nolichucky River rose more than 30 feet, jumped its banks and demolished Uncle Johnny's. The Chestoa Bridge, which crossed the river next to the hostel was completely taken out. The trail would have to be diverted 4 miles into town, complimented by a "ferry" the following spring.

The damage was also extensive on the trail, where hundreds of miles were blocked by blow downs and washed out by flooding. Of all the damage, the worst was a Iron Mountain Trailhead, right were I was injured and came off trail.



No Bridge, Just a Ferry

It ended up being a year before I could return to the trail. Every time I planned a section hike, I would cancel at the last minute, always because it was painfully obvious that my legs had not recovered. (Pun intended.) As my legs continued to slowly recover from muscle injury, trail maintainers worked diligently to reopen the Appalachian Trail. Damascus was rebuilt, as was Uncle Johnny's. The Chestoa Bridge and the trailhead at Iron Mountain would take longer. (I note that every AT hiker needs to thank the hundreds of volunteers that helped reopen the trail.)

In October 2025, I nervously made the trip back to the trail, to test my legs, which seemed to have finally recovered. The rebuilt Uncle Johnny's was open and new lodging areas were ready for use. Several section hikers and SOBO thru-hikers were there spending the night with me. In the morning, Unicoi Steve took me back to the Iron Mountain Trailhead to give it a try again.

The trail south of there was still being cleared, so I took the hurricane bypass to the top of Unaka Mountain, followed by a long downhill along the trail, eventually to Beauty Spot. Unaka was in the fog and Beauty Spot was overgrown. Perhaps it's more beautiful in the spring. No shelters were nearby, but I found a camping spot along the side of the trail after hiking 10.9 miles for the day.

The camping spot was on the side of a small ridge with enough flat ground to squeeze in my tent. Too tired to eat dinner, I fell asleep bundled up and out of the wind, ready for a chilly night down to 40 degrees. I woke before dawn, looking out of my tent at a full moon, which illuminated the entire area. Well rested, after a cup of coffee and Pop Tarts

for breakfast, I packed up my gear and headed out for day #2.

The trail from my stealth site back to Uncle Johnny's was 9 and a half miles of downhill, much of it very steep. This was the test that my legs needed. If I could complete the day, it would be a sign that everything would be okay.

After a mile I came to Indian Grave Gap and was greeted by a voice, "Greetings hiker!" It was Brother Tom. He's a friar who ministers to hikers on the Appalachian Trail in the local area. His pickup was parked next to the crossing, packed with water, fruit and snacks; all for the taking. I sat for a spell with Brother Tom. Uplifting conversation, water and fresh fruit made the morning perfect!

The remaining 8 1/2 miles was steep and the going was very slow. Perhaps the smartest decision would be to take my time and maybe even stop for the night along the way. However, Curley Maple Gap shelter, 5 miles into my day, was not all that inviting. The next 2 1/2 miles followed a stream bed and dropped 1,200 feet. But, I finally made it down to the northern bank of the Nolichucky River, legs sore but intact. I had made it without serious re-injury! The staff from Uncle Johnny's shuttled me from the Chestoa Trailhead across the river, where I spent another night at the hostel before heading home. Success! I had covered 20 miles of trail in 2 days that included 5,400 miles of total descent with an 8% grade.



I still had a about 900 miles to complete the entire Appalachian Trail. This included about 150 miles in the south, 300 miles across CT, NY, NJ and PA; and the 450 miles of trail in Maine and New Hampshire. I hadn't made a serious New Year's resolution since 2014, when I began contemplating hiking the AT. It was time for another resolution. I would start training and tackle the hardest miles of the trail in the summer.

The training began in earnest mid-January. I was motivated by fear of failure, or worse yet, injury in the 100 Mile Wilderness, far away from help and rest. Slowly over time my legs began to feel even stronger. The plan was to finish the south during the spring and then summit Katahdin in early July, to begin the trek through Maine south into New Hampshire.



**The work stops here... For now!  
I'll write more later in 2026 as I  
continue to hike the AT.**



Puffin north of Harpers Ferry in March 2017

# About the Author

Chris Brooks “Puffin” is a retired Emergency Medicine Physician, small sailboat racer, and avid backpacker. He began section hiking the AT in 2015. He is a distant relative of one of the original founders of the ATC, Byron Avery.

# Glossary

**Aeroblazing** - Term conceived to describe taking the gondola to the top of Killington Peak instead of hiking up the mountain.

**ALDHA** - Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association.  
Website: [aldha.org](http://aldha.org)

**Anaplasmosis** - One of several tick borne diseases. It is relatively rare compared to others on the AT.

**Aquamira™** - A two-part chemical mix that, when combined, forms a solution of chlorine dioxide. The solution sterilizes one liter of water in 15-30 minutes. It kills protozoa, bacteria *and* viruses, but does not remove particulates or chemicals.

**AT** - The *Appalachian Trail* extends almost 2,200 miles between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Katahdin in Maine, passing through 14 states.

**ATC** - The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, this organization has overseen the management and conservation of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail since 1925.

[appalachiantrail.org](http://appalachiantrail.org)

**Base Weight** - The weight of a hiker's pack without consumable items, such as food, fuel and water.

**Bivvy** - The bivouac sack is an ultralight shelter option which consists of a waterproof sack with a small raised area over the head only.

**Blue Blazing** - Utilizing one of the side or alternate trails instead of hiking on the AT, following white blazes. These side and alternate trails are generally marked with blue blazes on the trees.

**Bounce Box** - A box of supplies mailed to a location ahead on the trail, typically a hostel, hotel or post office. If sent priority mail and unopened, the USPS will “bounce” the box to another location free of charge.

**Bubble** - the large group of NOBO thru-hikers that begin at Springer Mountain each spring and move en mass northward towards Katahdin.

**Camel-Up** - A strategy to drink as much water as possible at a water source to avoid carrying large amounts of this heavy resource.

**Cat Hole** - A 6 inch deep hole dug in the wilderness a least 200 feet away from the trail and any water source to facilitate burying one’s biological waste.

**CDT** - Continental Divide Trail, which runs from the Mexican border in New Mexico to Canada in Glacier National Park, through the Rocky Mountains

**Cuben Fiber™** - The original UHMWPE material developed for the America<sup>3</sup> yacht racing campaign.

**DCF™** - Dyneema Composite Fabric, a cloth made of UHMWPE fibers laminated in between polyester films. It is light weight, strong and waterproof.

**Dyneema™** - The trade name UHMWPE material originally manufactured by the dutch company DCM.

**FKT** - Fastest Known Time, can be supported or unsupported and usually applies to a trail's thru hike.

**Flip-Flopper** - A hiker who starts in one area of the trail and after completing a section, moves to another area of the trail. Most commonly *flip-floppers* start at Harpers Ferry, hike north to Mount Katahdin and then hike south from Harpers Ferry to Springer Mountain.

**Hiker Bubble** - The large group of hikers, usually numbering in the hundreds, that leave Springer Mountain in the early spring heading north towards Mount Katahdin.

**Hiker Hunger** - The food craving that long distance hikers develop after several weeks on the trail as they burn large numbers of calories daily.

**LASH** - Long Ass Section Hike. A section hike that traverses a significant number of miles, typically hundreds, requiring resupply during the hike.

**Lash-It™** - Sampson's brand name 1.75 - 2.2 mm UHMWPE single-braid rope developed for lashing. It has many uses in backpacking, especially for bear bag and guy lines.

**LASHER** - A long ass section hiker. There are many opinions for the definition of “long.”

**Leave No Trace** - A movement dedicated to minimizing impact on the outdoors. There are 7 principles of LNT including: plan ahead and prepare, camp on durable surfaces, dispose of waste properly (i.e. pack it out), leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife and be considerate of others.

**Lyme Disease** - One of several tick borne diseases. Lyme disease is prevalent along the northern half of the AT and is the most common medical condition taking hikers off trail.

**Muggle** - A tourist or day hiker, typically curious about AT long distance hikers.

**Nero** - A day when fewer miles are hiked. Often ends in a town for resupply or rest.

**NOBO** - North bound.

**NOC** - The Nantahala Outdoor Center, located near Bryson City, NC just south of Smokey Mountain National Park. A satellite branch is also located in Gatlinburg, TN.

**Norovirus** - A highly contagious gastrointestinal virus that produces a syndrome of diarrhea and vomiting usually lasting several days. Outbreaks along the AT during the spring hiker bubble occur every year.

**PCT** - Pacific Coast Trail, which runs from the Mexican border in southern California to the Canadian border in Washington state. Much of the trail is through the Sierra Nevadas.

**Pink Blazing** - Following a romantic desire as you hike the trail.

**PUDS** - Pointless ups and downs.

**Roller Coaster** - The sadistic 13 mile stretch of trail from Rod Hollow Shelter to the Blackburn Trail Center in Northern Virginia that is renowned for 10 pointless climbs and descents along a narrow trail corridor.

**Section-Hiker** - One who hikes on the AT in sections. Each trip, or section, can be of any length. Some are long and some are short. A section hiker's goal is generally to hike the entire trail over a period of years.

**SHT** - Superior Hiking Trail. The trail that starts in Duluth, MN and follows the northwestern shore of Lake Superior to the Canadian border for about 300 mi. [superiorhiking.org](http://superiorhiking.org)

**Silk Blazing** - Clearing the trail of spider webs as you hike along the trail. The first hiker on trail each morning has the privilege of silk blazing and saving others the experience.

**SOBO** - South bound.

**Soft Shackle** - a self-locking loop typically made of UHMWPE line originally developed by yacht racers. Replaces a carabiner or shackle; it is stronger and lighter.

**Spectra™** - Sampson's trade name for their UHMWPE line.

**Stealth Camp** - A campsite set up along the trail, typically not at one of the designated shelter or other campsites. It is permitted in many areas along the AT, but may be counter to regulations in others, requiring "stealth."

**Thru-Hiker** - One who hikes on a trail, attempting to thru-hike the entire trail in a period of less than 12 months.

**Trail Angel** - One of the many dedicated individuals who provide their time, resources and support to the trail community. Some are modest and prefer to be called "train support people," but they are all truly angels.

**Trail Chaplin** - The thru-hiker sponsored by the Methodist Church of Eastern Tennessee each year to minister to hikers on the trail.

**Trail Goblin** - Creatures that roam the AT providing generally misleading information or operate in a manner that leads to hiker indisposition. For example, a trail goblin might inform a hiker that trail magic is nearby when it's actually many miles away and closed. Or that a water source is nearby, flowing nicely, when it's far and dry. This term is not widely known; coined by Puffin after meeting several.

**Trail Magic** - An unexpected event providing needed and/or welcome benefit to hikers. Often manifested as hiker feeds set up along the trail by enthusiasts desiring to support hikers. (Coming to a road crossing and finding a cook-out would be an example.)

**Trail Name** - A nickname used on trail. It is often bestowed on a hiker at an ignominious moment, but may also be self-designated.

**Trail Family** - A trail family formed when thru-hikers group together as they find other like-minded and like-paced hikers moving along the trail.

**Triple Crown** - The three major long distance hiking trails in the US, including the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Coast Trail and the Continental Divide Trail. A hiker who has completed all three trails is known as a *Triple Crown*.

**Triple Crown** - A hiker who has completed thru-hikes of all three major long distance trails in the US: AT, PCT and CDT.

**UHMWPE** - Ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene. *UHMWPE* was commercialized in the late 1970s by the Dutch chemical company DSM as Dyneema, and also commercialized by Honeywell (then AlliedSignal) as Spectra. It is widely used in defense applications, medical devices, sailing, hiking equipment, climbing, and many other industries.

**Ultralight** - The ways of hikers who strive to hike with minimal weight in their packs. High tech materials and other innovations make this easier every year. Pack base weights are generally less than 10-15 lbs.

**Vortex** - Getting stuck in the *vortex* occurs when a hiker is drawn into town or another refuge and stays longer than planned.

**White Blazing** - Religiously following the trail markers, the white blazes on the trees, while hiking on the AT.

**Whoopie Sling** - An adjustable “finger-trap” style loop on a line often used to attach hammocks to tree straps.

**Vitamin “I”** - Ibuprofen, one of the items commonly found in hiker first aid kits.

**Yellow Blazing** - Getting in a vehicle and taking the road to move ahead on the trail. Felt to be “cheating” by most but often done to catch up with close friends or bypass unnavigable sections of trail.

**Zero** - A rest day when no miles are hiked. Hikers often “Take a *Zero*.”

**Zing-It™** - Sampson’s brand name 1.75 - 2.2 mm UHMWPE single-braid rope developed for arborists as throw line. It has many uses in backpacking, especially for bear bag and guy lines.

