

Thanks for the 'Memoir'ies: The Impact and Importance of Appalachian Trail Literature to  
Hiking Culture

By

Lauren Rachel Froats

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in English Language and Literature  
in conformity with the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

October 2021

Copyright © Lauren Rachel Froats, 2021

## **Abstract**

This paper is composed of a literary study on the memoirs and social media posts written or made by people who have thru or section hiked the Appalachian Trail in its entirety in order to better understand the culture of the Appalachian Trail, the motivations of the hikers, and the impact literature can have on the trail. The study looked at published memoirs set between 1948 to 2005, as well as interviews and social media posts up to 2021 surrounding thru hikers and their progress along the trail. The study also analyzed the impact thru hiking has on individuals and how literature plays a part in strengthening their connection to the Appalachian Trail even after they have completed their hike. In addition to the literary study, there is also an experiential section of the paper dedicated to my firsthand accounts of hiking the Appalachian Trail, being involved in thru hiker culture, and making my own contribution to the tradition of trail literature that is as connected to the trail as the act of hiking itself. This topic is worth examining because it investigates the connections between literature and long-haul hiking, as well as examining how literature fits into, and tracks changes in, the culture of Appalachian Trail thru hikers, something not before researched from a literary perspective. The findings show that literature is an integral part of what has become a “linear community,” along the 14 states that make up the Appalachian Trail, and that every piece of literature or social media post made regarding the Appalachian Trail works to add to this culture. This research can be used in the future to assess how the literature has become an accurate reflection of the culture insomuch that it can be used to form a base to which analysis of thru hiker culture can be conducted.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acronyms .....	iv
Appalachian Trail Timeline .....	v
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two: Memoirs and How They Contribute to Appalachian Trail Culture and History ...	13
Chapter Three: How Technology and Social Media Play a Part in New Trail Practices .....	26
Chapter Four: Keeping a Connection to the AT Post-Hike .....	33
Chapter Five: My Time on the Appalachian Trail.....	40
References .....	59
Appendices.....	62
Appendix A: Intended VT – NH Itinerary .....	62
Appendix B: Day Hike Kit List .....	64
Appendix C: Proposed Kit List for Longer Journeys .....	65

## Acronyms

AMC- Appalachian Mountain Club

AT- Appalachian Trail

ATC- Appalachian Trail Conservancy

AWOL- Absent Without Leave (and David Miller's trail name)

BRHC- Blue Ridge Hiking Company

CDT- Continental Divide Trail

NOBO- Northbound

PCT- Pacific Crest Trail

REI- Recreational Equipment Inc.

SOBO- Southbound

## Appalachian Trail Timeline

**1921:** Benton MacKaye dreams up the Appalachian Trail (AT) while atop Stratton Mountain in Vermont<sup>1</sup>

- MacKaye was dreaming of a space that would reform society away from industry and metropolitan living towards a more rural community.<sup>2</sup>
- This dream fell short and lacked distinct leadership, leading to MacKaye being replaced as the driving force behind the Appalachian trail.<sup>3</sup>

**1925:** The Appalachian Trail Conference (now known as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC)) was born<sup>4</sup>

**1926:** Arthur Perkins, one of the new leaders of the Appalachian Trail Project, joins the Executive committee of the Appalachian Trail Conference<sup>5</sup>

- Sometime over the next three years Perkins recruits Myron Avery.<sup>6</sup>
- The completion of the AT can be attributed to Avery.<sup>7</sup>
- Avery was responsible for campaigning for the Appalachian Trail recruiting the young and driven men that created the clubs who cleared and maintained the different sections of the trail.<sup>8</sup>

**1937:** The two final sections of the trail, one in Maine and one in the Smokey Mountains, were finished, thus marking the completion of the Appalachian Trail, although the trail never stopped changing<sup>9</sup>

**1945:** Daniel Hoch “introduced a bill providing for Federal protection of the A.T. as part of a national system of foot trails.”<sup>10</sup>

**1948:** Earl V. Schaffer became the first recorded person to thru hike the Appalachian Trail

- The AT measured 2050 mi in 1948<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” *Geographical Review* 77, no. 1 (1987): 77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/214677>.

<sup>3</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 78.

<sup>4</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 79.

<sup>5</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 79.

<sup>6</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 79.

<sup>7</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 79.

<sup>8</sup> Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 79.

<sup>9</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Shaffer, *Walking with Spring*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Laurie Potteiger, “Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021” (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 2.

**1955:** Grandma Gatewood became the first solo female thru hiker of the AT, and the oldest person to hike it in its entirety<sup>12</sup>

- The AT measured somewhere between 1999 and 2022 mi, those numbers being recorded between 1950 and 1965, with no record in between<sup>13</sup>

**1958:** The Southern Terminus is moved from Mount Oglethorpe to Springer Mountain<sup>14</sup>

**1968:** Daniel Hoch's bill was passed by congress<sup>15</sup>

**1979:** David Brill completes his thru hike

- The AT measured between 2075 and 2120 mi, the recorded trail length in 1978 and 1981 respectively<sup>16</sup>

**1983:** *Walking with Spring* was published<sup>17</sup>

**1990:** *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* was published<sup>18</sup>

**1996:** Bill Bryson attempted to thru hike the AT, while he did walk all of it, his hike was not continuous.

- Trail length: 2159 mi<sup>19</sup>

**1997:** *A Walk in the Woods* published<sup>20</sup>

**2000:** *Appalachian Trail in Bits and Pieces* was published<sup>21</sup>

**2003:** David 'AWOL' Miller completed his thru hike of the AT

- Trail length: 2171 mi<sup>22</sup>

**2005:** Jennifer Pharr Davis (Odysa) completed her first thru hike of the AT

---

<sup>12</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> "Springer Mountain Trailhead," United States Department of Agriculture: Forest Service, 5 May 2021, [https://www.fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet/cs/recarea?ss=110803&navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=FSE\\_003738&navid=11024000000000&pnavid=11000000000000&recid=10539&actid=51&ttype=recarea&pname=Springer%20Mountain%20Trailhead](https://www.fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet/cs/recarea?ss=110803&navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=FSE_003738&navid=11024000000000&pnavid=11000000000000&recid=10539&actid=51&ttype=recarea&pname=Springer%20Mountain%20Trailhead)

<sup>15</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (Anchor Canada, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Mary Sands, *Appalachian Trail in Bits and Pieces* (Fourth Printing, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

- Trail length: 2175 mi<sup>23</sup>

**2006:** *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* published<sup>24</sup>

**2008:** Pharr Davis set the record for fastest female thru hike of the AT at 57 days 8 hours<sup>25</sup>

- Trail length: 2176 mi<sup>26</sup>

**2010:** *Becoming Odyssea* published<sup>27</sup>

**2011:** Pharr Davis set the record for the fastest thru hike by any gender at 46 days, 11 hours, 20 minutes. She held this record until 2015 when Scott Jurek beat her record by 3 hours and 12 minutes.<sup>28</sup>

- Trail length: 2181 mi<sup>29</sup>

**2013:** *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Thru Hiker* published<sup>30</sup>

**2014:** the ATC made their first Instagram post. Since then, the page contains useful information like route closures, shelter closures, detours, and just general information about the AT

- *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* was published<sup>31</sup>

**2021:** The Appalachian Trail conservancy halted the awarding of 2000-miler designations for 2021 until the COVID-19 pandemic was declared under control by the CDC, the awarding was reinstated on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May.<sup>32</sup>

- Trail length: 2193 mi<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years," 1.

<sup>24</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Hicks, Meghan. *Jennifer Pharr Davis Post-Appalachian Trail Record Interview*. By Meghan Hicks. I Run Far, 8 Aug 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssea* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Hicks, Meghan. *Jennifer Pharr Davis Post-Appalachian Trail Record Interview*. By Meghan Hicks. I Run Far, 8 Aug 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

<sup>30</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Thru Hiker* (

<sup>31</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> "2,000-Milers." Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 11 May 2021, <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-at/thru-hiking/2000-milers/>.

<sup>33</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1.

## Chapter One: Introduction

It is said that it takes five million steps<sup>34</sup> to walk from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail (AT). Since its completion in 1937,<sup>35</sup> nearly 22 000 people have reported walking 2 000 miles of the AT to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and have joined the prestigious 2 000-milers club.<sup>36</sup> 2 000-milers are individuals who have walked 2 000 miles of the AT, either in sections, for a day or weekend, or in one go as a thru hiker. These three categories make up the types of foot traffic on the AT, but the two that will be analyzed most for this paper are section hikers and thru hikers, with a greater concentration on the latter as there has been more research conducted on those who chose to make the AT their home for four to six months. The literature that has come out of these treks creates an image of the Appalachian Trail that is full of unique, challenging, and life-changing experiences. The aforementioned image, the memory of hikes on the AT, and the trail are preserved through the literature that comes off trail with the hikers. Hiking, while not as technically challenging as some other distance-based adventures, such as sailing a large distance, measures more the perseverance of the individual and their mental fortitude more than any other activity. Hikers will experience every season with the weather the AT throws at them, pair that with the constant ascent and descent of mountains, one will find their mental and physical fortitude tested. Thru hiking the AT is a challenge many have taken on, and it is thanks to one individual that the trail exists today. Benton MacKaye dreamed of the Appalachian Trail while atop Stratton Mountain in Vermont in 1921,<sup>37</sup> one hundred years ago, and since its conception, the AT has undergone many changes, both

---

<sup>34</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 60.

<sup>35</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 5.

<sup>36</sup> “2,000-Milers.” Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 11 May 2021, <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-at/thru-hiking/2000-milers/>.

<sup>37</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 113.



physically and culturally. To understand the importance of written accounts and memoirs of the Appalachian Trail, one must understand what makes the AT more than a footpath through the woods and mountains.

The Appalachian Trail is a protected stretch of ever-changing trail that covers more than 2 000 miles from Georgia to Maine. However, the trail was originally proposed to stretch only from Mount Washington in New Hampshire to Mount Mitchell in North Carolina.<sup>38</sup> Even after the trail was finished in 1937, with the trail now extending down to Georgia and up to Maine, and with the southern and northern terminuses being in the States they remain today, Georgia and Maine respectively, the trail was not quite done drastically changing. One final great change was made in 1958, when the southern terminus in Georgia was moved from Mount Oglethorpe to Springer Mountain to the northeast, where it remains today.<sup>39</sup> The trail was moved because of “increased development around Mount Oglethorpe,”<sup>40</sup> but many thru hikers still use part of the original trail that begins at Amicalola Falls as an approach to Springer Mountain.<sup>41</sup> The added approach of Amicalola Falls is enticing to many hikers due to the history as an original section of the trail, and for the shared belief that missing the approach means the hike is incomplete. While the termini now have their permanent homes, the trail itself is ever restless, wandering a few extra miles every year on account of new developments, reroutes, and forest fires. As of 2021, the AT stretches a whopping 2193 miles, 143 miles more than the first recorded thru hike

---

<sup>38</sup> Benton MacKaye, “A Project for An Appalachian Trail,” *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (1921): 4.

<sup>39</sup> “Springer Mountain Trailhead,” United States Department of Agriculture: Forest Service, 5 May 2021, [https://www.fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet/cs/recarea?ss=110803&navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=FSE\\_003738&navid=11024000000000&pnavid=11000000000000&recid=10539&actid=51&ttype=recarea&pname=Springer%20Mountain%20Trailhead](https://www.fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet/cs/recarea?ss=110803&navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=FSE_003738&navid=11024000000000&pnavid=11000000000000&recid=10539&actid=51&ttype=recarea&pname=Springer%20Mountain%20Trailhead)

<sup>40</sup> “Springer Mountain Trailhead,” United States Department of Agriculture: Forest Service.

<sup>41</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 9-11.

completed by Earl V. Schaffer in 1948.<sup>42</sup> Despite this monumental foot distance, the distance from Springer Mountain to Mount Katahdin is only 1300 miles<sup>43</sup> as the crow flies, proving Schaffer's declaration that one of the trail developers, Myron Avery, "always favored the scenic way, rather than ease of access."<sup>44</sup> Despite all the physical changes the trail has experienced in the last 84 years, the largest change can be found in the culture that is created on the trail and the thru hikers that tackle this journey.

It is thanks to the literature created on and about the Appalachian Trail that this cultural shift can be seen, as the guidebooks full of quantitative data do little to immortalize the types of hikers that call the trail home for four to six months or the people and towns they interact with. Prior to the 1970s, only 60 individuals made it onto the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's 2,000-Milers list, meaning that the remaining 21 493 individuals on the list as of the spring of 2021 all made their pilgrimage along the Appalachian Trail from the 70s onward.<sup>45</sup> The jump in AT completions from the 60s to 70s alone represented a total of 755 people, and this can be attributed to the culture shift in the 70s.<sup>46</sup> This is where the largest change in the Appalachian Trail took place, not necessarily in the trail itself, but in the culture that led to the upswing in traffic on the trail, including individuals who chose to section or thru hike. Understanding the culture of the trail and how it has changed over the years is vital to understanding the literature that came off the trail, as a culture as unique as the one found on the AT shapes the literature that it created.

---

<sup>42</sup> Laurie Potteiger, "Trail Mileage Through the Years Updated thru 2021" (Chart sent via email, Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021), 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 57.

<sup>45</sup> "2,000-Milers." Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 11 May 2021, <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-at/thru-hiking/2000-milers/>.

<sup>46</sup> "2,000-Milers." Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

The number disparity prior to the 70s was not for lack of knowledge about the trail, as there were numerous articles written about the Appalachian Trail, including one in a 1949 edition of National Geographic that inspired Grandma Gatewood's thru hike. Gatewood holds a significant place in the history of the AT as she was the first ever woman to thru hike the trail, along with being the first, and oldest, woman to thru hike it three times. For many her hike was an inspiration and a symbol that anything can be accomplished if you put one foot in front of the other, a statement emphasized by the fact that before Gatewood started her trek, she told her children she was "going on a walk".<sup>47</sup> However, Gatewood would not become the media sensation she ended up being until after she stumbled across the National Geographic article. The article, titled "Skyline Trail from Maine to Georgia," was a "nineteen-page spread with color photographs" and for Grandma Gatewood it was "a window to another place."<sup>48</sup> The article discusses the author, Andrew Brown's, own experience on the AT, spreading the sights and experiences of the trail to anyone who wished to pick up the magazine. However, this was not an account of a thru hike and thus did not inspire similar journeys. While the article did talk about Schaffer's historical trek, Brown's own journey was more of a skip from scenic place to scenic place, "visit[ing] the high spots of interest and elevation, by-passing the less noteworthy parts by car."<sup>49</sup> What follows this assertion is a condensed version of events that strives to inform the reader of all that the Appalachian Trail has to offer in a mere 19 pages, less when the large spread of photos is taken into account. While the article is not as informative of some of the memoirs that will be examined, it does do an adequate job informing the public about the existence and highlights of the Appalachian Trail. Despite Schaffer's journey showing that a feat

---

<sup>47</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Brown, "Skyline Trail from Maine to Georgia," *The National Geographic Magazine* 96, no. 2 (1949): 219.

such as thru hike was possible, along with Grandma Gatewood's, there was still a distinct lack of thru hikers. The reason for this is that the knowledge that a thru hike is possible came at a time when the culture had not quite caught up to this need for rugged adventure.

It was at the end of the Vietnam War that the culture began to shift and the desire for long perilous journeys began to grow. David Brill outlines this desire well in his memoir *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker*. Brill had turned 18 just as the US began to pull out of Vietnam, and as a result “was left feeling like a man who had spent years preparing – mentally, emotionally – for a test, only to arrive a day late to a darkened classroom and to realize that [he] would never know how well [he] might have done.”<sup>50</sup> This feeling is similar to “the lost generation” of Hemingway and Pound, or the “beat generation” of Kerouac, and is classified by a sense of “pestering complacency that sends youthful seekers out in search of excitement and meaning” that follows after a war.<sup>51</sup> While this complacency played a large part in driving people to the trail in the 70s, it was not the only cultural shift that assisted in a thru hiker boom.

Adam Berg posits in his article, “To Conquer Myself: The New Strenuousness and the Emergence of ‘Thru-Hiking’ on the Appalachian Trail in the 1970s,” that an appropriate nickname for the 70s is the “Me Decade”. Berg applied this term to his research because the public’s ideologies shifted from the civil issues of the 60s to a more personal focus.<sup>52</sup> The emergence of the “Me Decade,” paired with the complacency of a post-war time, is what encouraged this surge in thru hikers along the AT. Adam Berg posits that the expectations of the

---

<sup>50</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1990) 15.

<sup>51</sup> Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Adam Berg, “‘To Conquer Myself’: The New Strenuousness and the Emergence of ‘Thru-hiking’ on the Appalachian Trail in the 1970s,” *Journal of Sport History* 42, no. 1 (2015) 5.

American people for a “profoundly revived United States” post-World War II were not met, causing a diminishment in “notions of social solidarity and conceptions of national community” and thus caused much of the population “to turn inward.”<sup>53</sup> It was the hope of many thru hikers that taking on the challenge of the AT would allow them to “supersede social constraints” and to “separate themselves from the manipulations of civilized life.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the displaced young adults with a distrust of social causes and desire for inner fulfillment created the perfect cultural conditions for the increased number of thru hikers in the 70s. However, despite the desire to be freed from society and its structures, thru hiking, since this 70s shift, has become very routed in the middle/upper class. The 70s saw a “backpacking boom [that] revolutionized American outdoor life,” but much of the “‘revolution’ was predicated on a consumer culture” and that “by the 1970s the very idea of wilderness became entwined with consumerism,” thus placing the ability to thru hike or backpack into the hands of only those who could afford it.<sup>55</sup>

Thru hikers like Grandma Gatewood began to become few and far between. Gatewood’s packing list was a drawstring bag filled with some long-lasting food,

“Band-Aids, a bottle of iodine, some bobby pins, and a jar of Vicks salve [along with] slippers and a gingham dress that she could shake out if she ever needed to look nice. She stuffed in a warm coat, a shower curtain to keep the rain off, some drinking water, a Swiss Army knife, a flashlight, candy mints, and her pen and a little Royal Vernon Line memo book.”<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Berg, “‘To Conquer Myself,’” 5.

<sup>54</sup> Berg, “‘To Conquer Myself,’” 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Berg, “‘To Conquer Myself,’” 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014) 10.

However, this sort of kit list was soon unheard of as the backpacking community was inducted with “technical innovations and a flourishing marketplace [that] made wilderness adventures possible for the inexperienced but well-off adventurers.”<sup>57</sup> While being able to complete a thru hike without needing to have previous backwoods knowledge and experience should have made the trail more inclusive, and aligned it closer to Benton MacKaye’s original vision, the upswing in consumerism made it even more difficult for lower income individuals to pursue a long-haul hike. What had begun as an activity for the everyday American, quickly became a venture for corporate America and a race to see who could put out the best gear for the long-haul journey and make the most money from it too. While thru hiking always meant needing to take four to six months off work and saving for food and resupply days, it now also meant needing to save even more to be able to afford the vital pieces of gear for the journey, as a growing market almost always means inflation. Bill Bryson was shocked at the cost of his equipment for his attempt at thru hiking the Appalachian Trail (two hundred and fifty dollars just for his pack, and nearly two hundred and thirty-five dollars for the *Appalachian Trail Guides*).<sup>58</sup> A similar Gregory pack and set of guides in present day, nearly 30 years later, is around two hundred and seventy dollars for the pack<sup>59</sup>, and the books retail for thirty dollars a set (each set containing maps and a guidebook for one to two states opposed to the whole collection).<sup>60</sup> While the price remains relatively the same today compared to 1996, when inflation is considered, the new gear at the time of Bryson’s purchase would have amounted to a four-hundred-and-eighty-

---

<sup>57</sup> Adam Berg, “‘To Conquer Myself’: The New Strenuousness and the Emergence of ‘Thru-hiking’ on the Appalachian Trail in the 1970s,” *Journal of Sport History* 42, no. 1 (2015) 7.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (Anchor Canada, 2015) 20-21.

<sup>59</sup> “Backpacking Packs,” Gregory Packs. 06 June 2021. <https://www.gregorypacks.com/packs-bags/backpacking-packs/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Books and Maps: Appalachian Trail,” Mountaineers Books. 06 June 2021. [https://www.mountaineers.org/books/books#b\\_start=0&c11=Appalachian+Trail+Conservancy](https://www.mountaineers.org/books/books#b_start=0&c11=Appalachian+Trail+Conservancy).

dollar pack today.<sup>61</sup> This demonstrates how the late twentieth century saw a boom in the commercial hiking industry that has balanced out since but still contributes to the elitism that exists on the trail.<sup>62</sup>

When long trail hiking, a balance needs to be struck between equipment and knowledge, the former being readily available in trail towns, to increase the chances of a successful thru hike. David Brill outlined this balance well, commenting that being too equipment heavy would lead to taxed out joints along with managing to “leave [the hikers] crippled.”<sup>63</sup> While not having enough equipment would potentially lead to death, “owing to [...] familiarity with only a few edible plants,” and without the extensive knowledge required to forage for proper nutrients while on the trail.<sup>64</sup> In order to reach this balance, the option of being able to purchase the right equipment is still required, the bare minimum being good shoes and pack at least, even if the correct knowledge is present. Thus, the 70s cultivated thru hiking into a more popular endeavour that gives the impression of being for all who desire to try, while also becoming an adventure for only those who could afford it.<sup>65</sup>

The 70s surge in hikers was just the beginning of a shift in the culture and the popularity of the AT. Every year more and more people attempt, and complete, the Appalachian Trail. With

---

<sup>61</sup> “Inflation Calculator,” CPI Inflation Calculator. 06 June 2021.  
<https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1996?amount=270>.

<sup>62</sup> All prices listed are in USD.

<sup>63</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1999) 126.

<sup>64</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1999) 126.

<sup>65</sup> Financial security is one of the exact reasons why my own trip is operating out of three state parks and consisting mainly of day hikes, as I cannot afford the gear that would be required for a two-week sojourn from Stratton Mountain to Mount Washington. This does not mean that the AT is closed to me, but it does limit the experiences I can have and sections of the trail I can see. However, it has the added benefit of allowing me to hopefully participate in my own trail magic, since I can carry treats that thru hikers would consider too much extra weight and wouldn't cost me as much as a dehydrator and a backpacking tent. As it is, I have purchased nearly five hundred dollars' worth of gear just to feel successfully outfitted for some day hikes, along with the gear I already own.

the ever-growing number of hikers comes an ever-growing number of literary works that inform the public about the AT, and thus continue to expand on what it means to thru hike. One of the key details present in the literature that is missed in the guidebooks is the culture that is created by and around thru hikers. To become a thru hiker is to join in, to various extents, similar ideologies. Gone are the nationalities or state citizenships; now all hikers are citizens of the Appalachian Trail and thus a new culture is born. The best term for this culture that David Brill came across in his journey and research is “a linear community”, coined by Nancy Sills.<sup>66</sup> Regardless of where a hiker is on the trail, they can find like-minded individuals to hike with during the day, or to make camp with at night, even running into the same friends as they hike, and this is all thanks to this mobile and linear community along the AT. Through the decades and with every new memoir penned about the AT, this term remains accurate in its reflection of the culture of long-haul hikers as thru hikers that make the AT their home bring their community with them as they hike.

Despite the changing times and the ever-changing trail, the culture of thru hikers is one aspect of the Appalachian Trail that has seemingly only cemented itself over time. While some of the terminology was developed with time, such as “trail magic” or “blue-blazing,” the sentiment remains the same. Small miracles experienced along the trail that were set in motion by kind locals now have the name “trail magic.” Trail magic is a surprise act that non thru hikers perform for hikers to bring a small moment of joy to a day that was most likely difficult for the hiker. Handing out snacks or leaving jugs of fresh water out for hikers without expecting anything in return is one example of trail magic but running a hiker hostel that is not listed in any

---

<sup>66</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1999) 74.



guides and just having hikers stumble into a situation with a bed and hot shower can be another. Hiker hostels that are advertised can also be considered trail magic because most hostels do not charge for the stay and are just happy to assist. Most of these acts are done specifically for the thru hikers and with them in mind, demonstrating how the act came fully to fruition along with the influx of thru hiking attempts; during Schaffer's journey they just came as pleasant surprises. One such instance of "trail magic," prior to the establishment of the term, was when Schaffer stumbled across "a grocery store in the front room of a nearby house [which] started [...] because [the owner's] neighbors complained of having no place to buy food in the community."<sup>67</sup> This surprise grocery store is trail magic, just as some of the trail hostels created just for hikers that many long term hikers use, such as the hiker hostel in the Presbyterian Church of the Mountain that Mary Sands and her girls stayed in in Pennsylvania.<sup>68</sup>

Trail magic has become such an ingrained part of long-distance trails that the people creating trail magic are known as Trail Angels on one of the other American long trails, the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) and there have been social media accounts made by these individuals to help spread the word to thru hikers. One such account, though along the PCT, is on TikTok and Instagram as @trailangelcafe and is run by Michael Dwyer. The account is just generally used to spread information about the café, such as location and amenities provided, as well as posting small music clips recorded by Dwyer to spread positive vibes.<sup>69</sup> While on the trail it is my plan to participate in trail magic by carrying a small variety of protein bars and snacks to give to passing thru hikers, as well as setting up by a trailhead or road crossing on one of the scheduled off days to offer hot dogs and beverages. To participate in this vital aspect of the

---

<sup>67</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004) 102.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Sands, *Appalachian Trail in Bits and Pieces* (Fourth Printing, 2000) 139.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Dwyer, "@trailangelcafe," *TikTok*. 06 June 2021.

culture in any form is a part of the experience that I do not want to pass up. In addition to that, the term trail magic lends to the idea that thru hiking takes place in a cultural sphere that is not “normal” life, emphasizing the idea that the AT is outside the sphere of regular life and therefore makes the transition between hiking culture and “normal” life all the more drastic and difficult at the end of the hike. It is one of the inclusive aspects of the trail that is missing from the everyday.

There are other aspects of the culture that demonstrate the restrictive, yet inclusive, nature of thru hikers. One such example of the inclusivity of the culture are trail names. Nicknames given to thru hikers, either by other thru hikers or by the hikers themselves, that often embody the spirit of the hiker or a feature about them like a brand they wear or a food they always eat. Trail names are often given in affection, or jest, and function as a sort of welcome into the trail community. Hikers will then use their trail name when introducing themselves to other hikers or when signing the trail registers, which are notebooks used as an informal logbook and news passing source located at shelters along the way. However, the elitist and restrictive nature of the culture comes out when analyzing the aforementioned “blue-blazers,” a title given to people who take the shortcuts and aren’t considered true thru hikers to some.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the AT, while inviting to all who would like to try and hike it, does not seem to present a very diverse demographic when it comes to its hikers. In 2019, the ATC reported that only forty-four of the eight-hundred and thirty-four self-reported completions of the trail identified as non-Caucasian.<sup>71</sup> There was no number for the individuals who chose not to identify their race. While being a predominately white sphere of individuals, it is also a very masculine sphere, with women making up approximately thirty percent of the reported hike completions.<sup>72</sup> This differs

---

<sup>70</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 27.

<sup>71</sup> Laurie Potteiger, email about the demographics, 28 Jan 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Potteiger, email about demographics, 28 Jan 2021.

significantly from the percentage in 1973, where only seven percent of hikers self-identified as female, but the AT is a long way off being a trail with even representation. Unfortunately, the demographics of the memoirs being written reflect that of the trail and therefore do not completely represent all the individuals that hike the AT. Therefore, the more in-depth details of the culture will be examined with the knowledge that they currently reflect the majority of the hikers experience, but not all of them. This will be kept in mind as a closer investigation is made into the memoirs as they are what offer the most information about the culture.

## Chapter Two: Memoirs and How They Contribute to Appalachian Trail Culture and History

It is said that Earl V. Schaffer is the man who inspired thousands to hike the Appalachian Trail. As the first recorded thru hiker, that assertion stands the test of logic. However, thru hiking wasn't the only trend that came out of his journey. With Schaffer's monumental thru hike came a new trend of hiking travel memoirs centered on the AT. Schaffer is not only the first recorded person to thru hike the trail but is also the first person to record the journey in a memoir. The cover of the most recent edition of Schaffer's memoir *Walking with Spring* announces that Schaffer's journey is "the story that inspired thousands of Appalachian trail thru-hikers."<sup>73</sup> While that sounds like quite the accomplishment, that number may be not reflect the sheer number of people who have been inspired to try to thru hike the AT. It is said that for every person that completes a thru hike of the AT, four more have tried.<sup>74</sup> In addition to thru hikers, there are also section hikers, day hikers, and weekenders that will visit the trail, amounting to approximately four million pairs of feet traversing some section of the Appalachian Trail annually.<sup>75</sup> Schaffer's journey, and the subsequent publication of his account of his hike, is one example of how the literature of the Appalachian Trail can influence the perception of the trail, shape the experience, give more to the meaning of a hike, and construct an image of the AT that entices hikers to try their ability to hike from Georgia to Maine.

Another example of the literature contributing to the traffic the AT sees is with *Grandma Gatewood's Walk*. While not written by Gatewood herself, it is written using accounts from her journals, newspaper articles, and retellings of her journey. Much like Schaffer's text, the cover of

---

<sup>73</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 7.

<sup>75</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1999) 74.

Gatewood's memoir lays a grand claim: "the inspiring story of the woman who saved the Appalachian Trail."<sup>76</sup> This proves to be a true statement later on in the memoir when it is revealed that the first news story published about Gatewood, "'Ohio Woman, 67, Hiking 2,050 Miles on Appy Trail'" made her a household name that was mentioned "on the street corners and in the halls of the United States Congress."<sup>77</sup> All of America was watching Grandma Gatewood complete her trek in 1955, and therefore was watching the Appalachian Trail too. Schaffer may have inspired thru hiker quests, but Gatewood brought the attention of the everyday people back to the trail.

There are many different methods to writing about the trail, and the different methods serve different purposes. Writing in journals while on the trail serves to be a record of the things seen, miles hiked, problems had, and other such daily records. These are important to maintaining the experience of the trail long after the hike is over. Earl Shaffer used this method, recording anything he thought was of note, or just "the day's impressions" in what he called his "Little Black Notebook."<sup>78</sup> Shaffer's notebook writing became as much a part of his hiking ritual as filling his water when it was empty, or putting one foot in front of the other day after day, as demonstrated by his comments of "*as usual* ... I scribbled the day's impressions in the Little Black Notebook."<sup>79</sup> This demonstrates how the recording of the journey is integral to the experience of hiking the Appalachian Trail. To be an AT hiker is not just to follow the white blazes, but to record it too. Kip Redick writes about how Appalachian Trail hikes form a sort of spiritual rambling, and that during the hike "deliberate engagement in the present moment and conscious dialogue with those immediate constituents of our environment are both required if we

---

<sup>76</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014) Cover.

<sup>77</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk*, 54.

<sup>78</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 35.

<sup>79</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 35. Emphasis mine.

are to script an authentic narrative of our lives.”<sup>80</sup> The record of a day’s hike for thru hikers becomes the script that forms the “authentic narrative of [their] lives” on the trail.<sup>81</sup> Recording this narrative is another way that writing is instrumental to a journey along the Appalachian Trail. Furthermore, daily trail writings lend more subtle emphasis to the hiker that they are not in their regular lives anymore. A lot of authors mention that they hike because they feel stuck and unhappy in their office jobs. However, these daily writings force the hiker to take a moment to slow down and take in the sights so that they can have an accurate record. This ability to slow down and to appreciate what is around them is not something that many people can do in an office job. This emphasis on mundane but radically different things than they are used to helps to maintain the experience that the hiker has left their old life and are taking on a new one.

Shaffer’s records demonstrate another reason why these daily records are so important to the hike, and that is for reflection. Additionally, these daily records are what get spun and expanded into the memoirs. The Little Black Notebook is mentioned many times throughout *Walking with Spring*, including when Shaffer talks about writing the text, such as “The Little Black Notebook says that supper was spaghetti and biscuits and that I didn’t sleep much.”<sup>82</sup> This small excerpt demonstrates how the daily writings get turned into much more, but also how they assist with reflection on the trail. It might just be the little moments that get recorded, but they do not get recorded on the trail at the time they happen. Often records happen after the hiker has made camp for the night and logged all their miles. This allows for reflection of the day, as Redick explains, part of the spiritual rambling that hikers endure is being “completely focused on

---

<sup>80</sup> Kip Redick, “Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making.” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 43.

<sup>81</sup> Kip Redick, “Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making.” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 43.

<sup>82</sup> Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking with Spring* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004), 63.

each step, each thrust of the hiking pole.”<sup>83</sup> Each of my hikes was about the next hill, the next bend or curve of the trail, and when the ascent would finally become a descent, and so I too wrote my journal at the end of the day. While the writings were reserved for the evenings, photos are the most common reflections taken while on the move. It takes just a moment for a photograph and therefore does not deter or slow the hiker much when there are still many miles to go.

Shaffer had his Little Black Notebook, and because he was the first recorded thru hiker, that sets a precedence of how thru hikers record their hikes that can be traced over time. Shaffer had his book and Gatewood had a diary, postcards, and newspaper articles. While her recordings varied in type, they were still the same in putting pen to paper. Mentions of her recording in her diary are not as frequent as Shaffer’s Little Black Notebook, but it did make an appearance in the list of items she brought with her in her pack.<sup>84</sup> In addition to writing in her diary at night, much like other thru hikers, Gatewood also sent postcards from stops along the way.<sup>85</sup> While the postcards were not for her benefit, since they were sent to her family, they were still moments of reflection for her about her momentous journey.<sup>86</sup> Another way in which Gatewood’s written reflection was a different from Shaffer was the media attention her journey brought and the interviews she gave as her form of written recollection.<sup>87</sup> The news chased her along the AT, Americans following her journey through their local newspapers. At one trail town in Virginia, Gatewood commented that “they [the newspapers] had found her again,” but that this time she

---

<sup>83</sup> Kip Redick, “Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making.” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 41.

<sup>84</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>85</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 54-55.

<sup>87</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 12.

“didn’t mind so much ... word was out, after all.”<sup>88</sup> This acceptance of her constant newspaper companions demonstrates how this form of written record became as much a part of her journey as Shaffer’s nightly entries. The diary entries, postcards, and newspaper articles served to recreate Gatewood’s journey, but unlike the other memoirs, this was not done autobiographically. Ben Montgomery had to use multiple sources to recreate the journey and demonstrates how written record of AT trips serves as a form of a more accurate record of the trail insomuch that it is traceable and will serve as a reminder of what occurred long after memory can no longer sustain the experience. While the ATC keeps a record of distances and hikers, it is only when that data is combined with hiker accounts that the whole picture of the Appalachian Trail can be put together.

David Brill took a different approach to the creation of his memoir than the others investigated here. While most thru hiker memoirs take a chronological approach to their record, Brill makes each chapter about a lesson he learned and where on the trail he experienced it. Additionally, each chapter begins with a transcribed excerpt from Brill’s trail journal or a trail register, which is a notebook at many of the shelters that acts as a collective journal of the hikers that pass through and also serves to share information with other thru hikers. Either an individual record or a collective record, both types of journals are forms of trail writing. The excerpt is then expanded on in the chapter to create the instruction to future hikers. This draws a direct link between the trail writing and the expanded memoir. This link is significant because it demonstrates how on trail writing is used to connect back to the trail in the future, reconnecting the hiker back to their journey as well. In addition, this link demonstrates how closely entwined hiking and Appalachian Trail literature is. In this instance, the trail literature Brill created is

---

<sup>88</sup> Montgomery. *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 63.



important in imparting information to future hikers. Brill's memoir would have come at the perfect time too since he was hiking during the cultural shift of the 70s and therefore was writing about the new types of thru hikers. Brill classified thru hikers into two groups, "those intent on savoring the trail experience, while still viewing Katahdin [or Springer] as the ultimate goal" and the second group "the peak-baggers – who viewed completing the Appalachian Trail as a Spartan feat that would enhance their sense of machismo without reconfiguring their attitudes or values."<sup>89</sup> This further demonstrates the 70s hiking shift as both Shaffer and Gatewood embodied the attitudes of the first group, and Brill only achieved this view after "discarding [his] pedometer"<sup>90</sup> and a mindset that quantifies the trail into miles and steps opposed to experiences. However, as the culture continued to shift over time the implication that hikers focused on the journey over the destination were superior thru hikers shifted as well. Now hikers with either mindset are equally respected as long as they are respecting the trail. This shift will be discussed later in conjunction with the technological changes on the trail.

With the upswing in hikers in the 70s came those with the second mindset, looking at the AT as something to be conquered instead of enjoyed. Regardless, the competition on the trail is not between hikers, but between the trail and the individual hiker. The feat of thru hiking is extremely taxing on one's body, leaving little time to try and actively compete against another hiker. The victory of completing the trail is always individual and a way to say that the hiker defeated what is considered the most difficult triple crown trail in America due to constant ascent and descent of mountains, not defeating other hikers by hiking faster. Nonetheless, many memoirs embody the ideology of savoring the experience, which fosters the practice of taking time to log

---

<sup>89</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1990), 38.

<sup>90</sup> Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See*, 38.

trail experiences every night. This demonstrates that the link between the AT and literature comes from mindful hiking, where it is more about the journey and the experience than the end destination.

The “peak-baggers,” as Brill termed them, record their journeys differently, often recording videos or doing interviews about their experiences, instead of writing them down. These individuals are also the types of hikers that go for speed records on the trail. This is demonstrated in Pharr Davis’s memoir when she meets David Horton, ex holder of the AT speed record in 1991, Trail Dog, who was attempting the speed record, and then with her own record-breaking journeys later-on. While Brill thought that there was less gained from the trail when trying to break a record, Pharr Davis noted that each record breaker she met was always “smiling and enjoying themselves,” and they were “not too busy to say hello,” demonstrating a remarkable ability to keep a strenuous pace on the trail while also not letting all the experiences slip by.<sup>91</sup> However, the emergence of social media and the subsequent culture shift changed the way that thru hikers recorded their journeys and increased the ability of peak-baggers to still interact with the trail in a way not previously possible when the way to record the journey was through putting pen to paper. This will be further discussed later in this paper.

Bryson’s text is an interesting account of a thru hike for a few reasons and it stands as an outlier to the rest of the texts. Bryson’s text is one of the most popular thru hike memoirs, without him ever actually completing his thru hike. The other thing that sets Bryson’s memoir apart is that he was not necessarily writing it to prolong or recall the journey, but because he was a travel writer, and this was another journey to profit from. Bill Bryson has built an empire on

---

<sup>91</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa*, (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 223.

travel writing, with approximately 11 travel books that span four continents and countless countries, his stories have enthralled many and even made it onto the big screen.<sup>92</sup> While Bryson may have had different motives for his writing since he was on the trail because of his writing, and not writing because of the trail, his text is still important to the overall culture of the AT since he has reached so many potential hikers with it.<sup>93</sup> His text has attracted the attention of many individuals who have no intention of thru hiking the trail due to its easy reading nature. It is an easy book to curl up with during a lazy afternoon as it is layered with humor and features Bryson as a sort of ill-prepared everyday man as he tries to fulfill his sudden desire to thru hike the AT.

Bryson was sure to include the many missteps, trials, and tribulations that he and his friend Katz went through in his book, and as lighthearted and enjoyable as Bryson's text is, it is viewed by many who love the AT as a book full of misinformation. In her article "Including Appalachian Stereotypes in Multicultural Education: An Analysis of Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*," Mary Jean Ronan Herzog posits that Bryson "buys and sells stereotypes as if they were truth," therefore creating a potentially harmful presentation of the Appalachian Trail.<sup>94</sup> The offensive stereotypes of Appalachia that Bryson often mentions in his text are the references to southern inbreeding and hillbilly stereotypes among others.<sup>95</sup> Neither of these stereotypes paint a flattering picture of the citizens in trail towns along the AT and compared to many of the other memoirs is very misleading in regards to the actual encounters thru hikers have with people who

---

<sup>92</sup> "Bill Bryson," Penguin, Penguin Books Ltd., 14 Oct 2021, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/1017933/bill-bryson.html?tab=penguin-books>

<sup>93</sup> If I mention doing my project on the memoirs of thru hikers, nine out of ten people will mention Bill Bryson's text *A Walk in the Woods*.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, "Including Appalachian Stereotypes in Multicultural Education: An Analysis of Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 124.

<sup>95</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (Anchor Canada, 2015), 5.

live close to the trail. The reviews of Bryson's text at the time of Herzog's article were mainly positive, with comments such as "if you have a sense of humor and interest in, but not slavish love of nature, you will love this book."<sup>96</sup> This comment is revealing in the way that some individuals do not understand thru hiker culture or the desire individuals have to complete such a feat, further emphasizing how the AT is outside "normal" life. While the review was positive in its opinion of the text, it was negative in its review for thru hikers, distancing Bryson's text from other memoirs which match respect for thru hikers and the text they have published. However, not all the reviews of Bryson's text were positive, with some hikers, particularly thru hikers, commenting that "Bryson attempts to be funny, but this book is more pathetic than humorous ... [the reviewer] found it sad that that his ill-conceived attempt at hiking the whole trail is strewn with stories of trash he left trail-side or in camp."<sup>97</sup> This is a particularly damning review because most hikers, and thru hikers especially, know the importance of the Leave No Trace Principle. Leave no trace is an unspoken agreement between hikers to carry in and out all man-made items, including garbage and waste. It is not a principle that governs only the AT, but all hiking trails, no matter how big or small. Bryson's text is an example of a good book, but a poor guide. It is entertaining and captivating in the way a good novel should be, but unlike other memoirs, the advice or perceived advice in the text can be harmful to the environment and anyone hoping to hike the AT themselves with only Bryson's book as a guide.

David Miller's text *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* is the first text to mention dealing with multiple forms of written record while on a thru hike. Like many, Miller had a journal that he recorded in while on the trail, but he expanded his journal entries into passages long before

---

<sup>96</sup> Herzog, "Including Appalachian Stereotypes in Multicultural Education: An Analysis of Bill Bryson's A Walk in the Woods," 125.

<sup>97</sup> Herzog, "Including Appalachian Stereotypes in Multicultural Education: An Analysis of Bill Bryson's A Walk in the Woods," 125.

his memoir was written. Miller had agreed to write updates on his hike for his hometown newspaper, essentially causing the same affect that social media posters cause by amassing a following in that there are now people holding the hiker accountable to their progress.<sup>98</sup> Passages to a newspaper or posts on Instagram each form a promise to make it to Maine in exchange for reading or following. Miller explains that he found writing the articles for the paper were troublesome because they took up time on a journey he was supposed to be experiencing in the moment. However, that philosophy changed after the hike when he realized that “experience is enriched by reliving it, contemplating it, and trying to describe it to another person,” thus bonding the thru hike and the literature created by it.<sup>99</sup> Miller mostly stopped in towns when he had to email his pieces off, but he also carried a PocketMail that allowed him to send and receive emails.<sup>100</sup> This is the first merger of tech that can record the journey in a written form and a thru hike mentioned in the memoirs. The instant response from friends and family fueled Miller’s journey as he found them “incredibly uplifting,” and could use those words of encouragement on tough days.<sup>101</sup>

Miller’s ability to access the world outside the trail shows the beginning of the shift in culture that cumulated into the social media records of thru hikes that are so popular today. Miller’s text also demonstrates how memoirs can be used as companions to guides as he often records data helpful to others planning a hike such as potential meals, shelter conditions, hazards, and pack weight among others. This connects to how Miller found a way to keep having a connection to the AT by writing guides for prospective hikers, opposed to attempting to go back to a completely “normal” life like the one he left. The importance of keeping a connection to the

---

<sup>98</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 15.

<sup>99</sup> Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*, 77.

<sup>100</sup> Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*, 33.

<sup>101</sup> Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*, 33.

AT after the trail is over will be discussed later in terms of trying to combat post trail depression and transitioning back into “normal” life with changed values and a changed view of oneself. The guides Miller publishes contain mostly technical data, but also have some tips for the journey near the beginning of the text, and at the beginning of each new mapped section.<sup>102</sup> ‘AWOL’ Miller is now a more household name due to these guides and their popularity, thus further cementing the importance of literature, be it memoirs or guides, to the trail.

Much like her predecessors, Pharr Davis kept a trail journal while on her trek. However, she also thru hiked during a time where trail journals existed both in a hiker’s pack and online. This added a new layer to the culture of the hike that was not present before. Although she does not mention people posting to social media, despite the rising popularity of Facebook, online blogs and journals seem to be the predominant form of online record keeping for thru hikers. One new layer to thru hiking that Pharr Davis experienced that the others did not is the speed at which information was disseminated off trail due to these blogs and journals. While Miller was a part of disseminating trail information to the public as part of his newspaper articles, those were intermittent and therefore the information was a few weeks old by the time it reached the public. However, for Pharr Davis this exchange of information was much faster. News of a young man’s suicide had a fellow thru hiker’s mother calling Pharr Davis just three days after the event to check up on her after seeing it mentioned in an online trail journal.<sup>103</sup> In previous years this exchange of information and subsequent follow up with the thru hiker would have taken weeks or even months. Pharr Davis even mentions being surprised by the speed at which information was spread to people off trail and the distance that information covered, as she only thought of

---

<sup>102</sup> David Miller, *The AT Guide* (Wilmington, AntiGravityGear, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 185.

people finding out on trail through the registers and word of mouth.<sup>104</sup> The linear community and conduit of the AT now stretched to include more people than those hiking from Georgia to Maine and would continue to expand as blogs and social media became more popular. This change in the community now means that it is possible to connect with the AT community even after the hike has been completed, but also means that individuals not hiking the trail understand more about the motivations of those on trail. There is now a subtle connection between what was before seen as two separate worlds, and the people who hike the trail no longer must divide themselves so completely into who they were before and after trail. This means that prospective thru hikers can connect with past thru hikers to get advice, or to begin preparing for the trail. The true experience of the linear community still happens on trail as those experiences cannot be replicated elsewhere, but the division between on and off trail is no longer so strong.

The memoirs of Appalachian Trail hikers are vital to understanding the culture of the AT because writing about the journey and hiking are inexplicably tied. Through the writings of hikers, a shift in the culture on trail can be seen throughout the ages, as well as shifts in ideology. The memoirs track the invisible changes in the AT just as the ATC tracks the more visible ones, such as the changes in miles or routes. More than just a mountain range binds the Appalachian Trail together over the 14 states, but the sense of this community and culture can only be translated through the experiences of AT hikers, whether through word of mouth, experiencing the trail oneself, or through writings. Furthermore, writing on the trail has been connected to the trail's increase in popularity as more people were made aware of the vastness of the trail and the new challenge of hiking it through. The memoirs can also act as guides in terms of the qualitative data regarding a thru hike, such as mental and physical stress, dangers realistically faced, and

---

<sup>104</sup> Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssea*, 185.

which trail towns to avoid, as well as some quantitative data regarding equipment, pack weight, food, etc. The literature of the AT is just as crucial as the trees, earth, and sky when it comes to the experience of thru hiking because it attests to and continues the specific culture and community of thru hiking that constitutes the distinctive Appalachian Trail experience.



### **Chapter Three: How Technology and Social Media Play a Part in New Trail Practices**

The emergence of social media and handheld technology has led to a new way to capture trail experience that makes it easier for all hikers, regardless of distance or length of time spent on the trail to record their journeys. Now with all the computing power possible in just a few ounces of weight, cell phones have become almost a necessity when thru hiking the trail. New developments in technology compatible with cell phones benefit any hiker, thru or not, when it comes to safety on trail. One such technological development is smaller satellite GPS devices/sat phones. Instead of needing a device for emergency calls and another for location, there are plenty of pieces of tech that turn your phone into the satellite communicator and GPS locator. Another piece of tech that is connected to the carrying of a cell phone is a battery pack. Relatively lightweight, they can charge a phone between trail towns, and some even charge themselves with solar panels. This is beneficial to both the bubble of safety that makes the thru hike more enjoyable, and the phone records that thru hikers create.<sup>105</sup>

Social media and apps are also pieces of technology that help hikers with safety and planning. Now hikers can access weather reports, or information on dangerous, closed, or rerouted parts of the trail. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy Instagram account is excellent at posting updates regarding unfriendly animals, shelter closures, and other trail information so hikers have ready access.<sup>106</sup> This access to information assists in planning the days hikes ahead, allowing for a hiker to adjust their mileage to account for a closed section or shelter. Prior to this ready access to information hikers would only know about the problem when they came to it. In

---

<sup>105</sup> My battery pack was used to its fullest potential while on trail, and I was only there for two weeks. It also comes on all my hikes if I am stuck or otherwise out on the trail for longer than expected.

<sup>106</sup> Appalachian Trail Conservancy, “@appalachiantrail,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/appalachiantrail?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/appalachiantrail?utm_medium=copy_link)

the example of the closed shelter, a thru hiker would then have to choose to push onto the next shelter, which in most cases is 12 or more miles away, or camp off the trail somewhere but without knowing where the next clean water source could be. There are also apps that can be used instead of maps while on the trail, such as Guthook Guides, which 2021 thru hiker and social media blogger @meas.k reported using to find fresh water close to her real time location.<sup>107</sup> Cell phones have realistically replaced many pieces of heavy gear, like maps, a camera, and GPS, with a single lighter alternative, even with the battery pack. While these technological advances make hiking the AT safer, the trek is still extremely challenging.

Safety is a key concern for thru hikers because of the length of the journey and the lack of support during sections of the trail like the Presidential Range or the Smokey Mountains. A twisted ankle could be the end of a thru hike but could quickly turn into a life-or-death situation depending on where the hiker is on their journey, how much food and water they have, and their shelter situation. Many thru hikers have moved to lighter trail hiking shoes from traditional boots, meaning that ankle support or protection has decreased. When the only way to get from one place to the next is by walking, any injuries can be dangerous and having a way to keep contact is important. Similarly, water is a necessity and with the added benefit of technology it can be easier to locate refill points or for a hiker to know if they are about to enter a long stretch of trail with limited water refill opportunities.

Besides the added benefit of safety, cell phones allow for a thru hiker to save their memories digitally through pictures and video, and even to share their experiences on social media. While writing the daily journals is a part of the hiking experience, getting the memoir

---

<sup>107</sup> Kayla, "@meas.k," Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/meas.k?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/meas.k?utm_medium=copy_link).

published is much more work and can limit the number of full thru hike accounts available to the public. Rather than going through the process of daily recording, writing, editing, and then trying to get a memoir published, hikers can now share their journey with the world as they go and reach a larger audience. This has the added benefit of knowing that strangers are watching the hike and turning that knowledge into motivation so to not fail in front of such a large audience. Furthermore, David Bromwich, in his article “How Publicity Makes People Real,” argues that publicity is more likely to make people consent to being their real selves.<sup>108</sup> When this argument is extended to influencers and social media, it suggests that the hike depictions are accurate in terms of the journey the hiker is undertaking. This is due to the fact that “it is essential to the procedure [of publicity] that the new self-image [of the individual] be identical with a broadcast image identifiable to people who never heard of [them] until it came into public view,” therefore maintaining the continuity of media presentation and real life.<sup>109</sup>

The largest followings of individuals thru hikes are usually gathered on Instagram and TikTok. While the former is a useful platform for posting photos, the latter tends to host videos. Most hikers will link their Instagram and TikTok accounts so that a viewer can find one from the other and see both types of content the hiker produces. Instagram allows up to ten photos or videos to be posted at one time, which allows for the thru hiker to create a daily or weekly photo-journal, depending on how often they can post, that depicts the AT in minute increments, capturing its beauty. These posts are often just snapshots into the journey that do not present a lot of information but allow for the viewer to see what the landscape of the hike is like. Where more information about the hike and the daily struggles are presented more often are on thru hikers’

---

<sup>108</sup> David Bromwich, “How Publicity Makes People Real,” *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 68, no. 1 (2001): 153.

<sup>109</sup> Bromwich, “How Publicity Makes People Real,” 146.

TikTok accounts. TikTok allows for videos or pictures to be spliced together into a video that can be up to three minutes long.<sup>110</sup> The app also has useful features such as voice-over, text to speech, and captions, along with a host of filters and effects. This allows thru hikers, such as @hikerhypehouse or @feed\_aurora, a thru hiker turned section hiker after an injury halted her attempted hike, to record daily vlogs of their journey with a few short videos from their day condensed into one, as well as tips and revelations about the trail. When asked why she records her journey, @feed\_aurora made a video giving credit to Cheryl Strayed, a PCT thru hiker who posted about her journey to social media as well as writing a very well-known memoir, that later was turned into a movie, titled *Wild*.<sup>111</sup> The posts are not to necessarily invite fame, but to have a public record of the journey and to share that journey with family and friends. Regardless of where a hike is taking place, every journey is experienced differently, and documenting the journey is one way to share what that hiker's experience was. Strayed's combination of social media posts and her memoir compilation further demonstrates how posting can act as another form of record on the trail, along with journal writing.

Besides social media, technology has led to the emergence of a new type of memoir, the video memoir or the video documentary. 2019 AT thru hiker Matt Lyons has plans to turn his 2022 PCT thru hike into a documentary titled SOBO. Much like the AT, most of the PCT thru hikers hike north bound, but Lyons is planning a south bound trip and to document the journey along the way.<sup>112</sup> However, with the popularity of social media, the documentaries of the thru hikes and social media posts regarding the same are not mutually exclusive. Matt Lyons promotes his documentary on his social media page, along with creating a social media page for

---

<sup>110</sup> Until August of 2021, videos could only be one minute long.

<sup>111</sup> Aurora Blanchard, "@feed\_aurora," TikTok, 03 Sept 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Matt Lyons, "@SOBODoc," Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/sobodoc?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/sobodoc?utm_medium=copy_link).

the documentary as well.<sup>113</sup> Sophia Garber, trail name Wheelz, created video blogs during her time on the trail for thetrek.co<sup>114</sup>, an online gear store, information repository, and blog for “all things long distance backpacking,” including the AT.<sup>115</sup> While Garber kept her social media for pictures and to update friends and family, much like postcards, emails, and phone calls had done for thru hikers previously, she kept any videos for the blogs posted for thetrek.co. Both accounts had different followings and by posting on different types of social media she increased the number of people she reached with her videos and therefore spread information and potentially thru hike inspiration to more people. While they were technically just blog posts, the continuous natures of the posts allowed the Trek, and its affiliates, to term all her posts a vlog.<sup>116</sup> Garber posts to YouTube, which is an entirely different form of social media all together. Here users often post longer videos, allowing for more information to be portrayed.

By watching Garber’s videos one after another, they form a sort of documentary and is accurate in the way that they reflect very similar themes to the memoirs, except in a collection of videos as opposed to a written format. There are videos on pre hike preparation, as well as how the COVID-19 pandemic halted her attempt at a 2020 thru hike, and then it picks up on trail in 2021. Her records are an account of her plans for the day, thoughts, feelings, and how her plans differed if the day ended unexpectedly. Plans never stay plans long on the AT, with Garber’s second day on trail adding an unexpected 4 miles to her day due to hiking at a faster speed than expected and her hiking partners for the day wanting to push on a little further with her joining

---

<sup>113</sup> Matt Lyons, “@mattslyon,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/mattslyon?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/mattslyon?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>114</sup> Sophia Garber, “@sophiagarber,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/sophiagarber?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/sophiagarber?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>115</sup> The Trek, “@appalachian.trail,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, [https://instagram.com/appalachian.trail?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/appalachian.trail?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>116</sup> The Trek, “@appalachian.trail,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021.

them.<sup>117</sup> Day seven of her journey brought some knee and shin pain, two frequent experiences for hikers that can lead to terminating the journey.<sup>118</sup> Garber discussed some of the precautions she takes due to her injury so that it does not get any worse, and briefly discusses how an uphill day is good for her injury as well as her hopes that her zero day in Franklin will help as well.<sup>119</sup> By documenting the seemingly mundane aspects of the hike, Garber is attempting to portray an authentic thru hike and to portray the truth of thru hiking. It is similar to the memoir writers keeping the details of their zero days and injuries in their texts. All information is presented to show the truth of thru hiking in terms of letting viewers or readers see the realities of hiking.

The videos continue to document the ups and downs of the trail, from Garber's mental state, to the weather, and the actual path of the trail. Much like other hikers she also documents her desires to be on trail and the anxiety of taking too many days off when not required.<sup>120</sup> The biggest difference between the documentary style videos Garber makes, and the memoirs is that with the videos you really see how the weather affects decision making in terms of mileage as well as the moods a hiker goes through as they push through this incredible challenge. It adds another layer of authenticity to the hike and has the added benefit of a large support network during the hike. It is hard to feel alone when one has a few thousand people cheering them on during their journey. However, as discussed previously, online connections do not fully replace the linear community as there are experiences that can only be really shared and felt while on

---

<sup>117</sup> Sophia Garber, "Sophia's 2021 AT Vlog #1: Amicalola to Hiawassee, GA," The Trek, YouTube, 25 March 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JygZ5gi9OWE&ab\\_channel=TheTrek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JygZ5gi9OWE&ab_channel=TheTrek).

<sup>118</sup> Sophia Garber, "Sophia's 2021 AT Vlog #2: Hiawassee, GA to Franklin, NC," The Trek, YouTube, 12 April 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UNEXGMggjE&list=PLOyEACJWUVgCr-UJMN5Yk\\_WTR8Cz9KkRs&index=7&ab\\_channel=TheTrek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UNEXGMggjE&list=PLOyEACJWUVgCr-UJMN5Yk_WTR8Cz9KkRs&index=7&ab_channel=TheTrek).

<sup>119</sup> Garber, "Sophia's 2021 AT Vlog #2: Hiawassee, GA to Franklin, NC," The Trek, YouTube, 12 April 2021

<sup>120</sup> Sophia Garber, "Sophia's 2021 AT Vlog #3: Franklin, NC to the NOC," The Trek, YouTube, 12 April 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMr8\\_1iY5O0&list=PLOyEACJWUVgCr-UJMN5Yk\\_WTR8Cz9KkRs&index=8&ab\\_channel=TheTrek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMr8_1iY5O0&list=PLOyEACJWUVgCr-UJMN5Yk_WTR8Cz9KkRs&index=8&ab_channel=TheTrek).

trail with other hikers. Some likes on a video will not replace the feeling of a full campsite after a long hike, commiserating about the day's events, or repeatedly falling into step with another thru hiker four states after seeing them last.

While technology has brought a change to the way that thru hikers record their journeys, it has not changed the basic themes and content. This is owing to the culture of the trail and its enduring nature of being a difficult and rugged activity. The pain of climbing a mountain or enduring the weather of all the seasons in one day is not lessened by the ability to record the day's events on a phone instead of a journal, or even by the knowledge of increased safety thanks to technology. Instead, technology has allowed for these challenges to be immediately known to others, opposed to not knowing about specific challenges published later in a memoir. Additionally, technology has brought a small amount of peace of mind to thru hikers regarding safety, which allows hikers to approach challenges with more confidence, while keeping the basis of the experience the same in its physicality. Technology has become just another piece of gear that hikers can use to help them with their arduous journey, same as lighter packs or the transition from hiking boots to hiking shoes. A hiker is not made lesser by the gear made available to them, as each hiker is a product of their time, the culture they grew up in, and the culture of the AT.

## Chapter Four: Keeping a Connection to the AT Post-Hike

David ‘AWOL’ Miller thought of the trail as a “conduit, humming with memories from the miles behind me and electric with the possibilities still ahead.”<sup>121</sup> This mindset would keep the trail alive for Miller even after he stepped off the trail thanks to his writing and the desire to relive trail experiences, which is akin to many other thru hikers post hike. Reliving the hike is a desire many thru hikers experience as they try to forge a continuous connection to the trail after the thru hike is over. Often, thru hikers will try to keep any connection to the AT alive in order to combat what has been termed as “post-trail depression.” While not a medical diagnosis, many finished thru hikers suffer from a sort of depression when they try to shift back into what their life was like before the trail. Kotut, Horning, Stelter, and McCrickard discuss the term “post-trail depression” and where it comes from in their article, “Preparing for the Unexpected: Community Framework for Social Media Use and Social Support by Trail Thru-Hikers”. In their research of post-hike discussion posts, Kotut et al. discovered that “post-trail depression” is a cultural term used by thru hikers and that it is often connected to feelings of “trail nostalgia, ... ‘missing’ the trail and the attendant culture and seeking commiserations from those who had undergone the hike as well.”<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, Kotut et al. also discovered that thru hikers used social media after the hike in order to “anchor [themselves] to the community,” by “describing the trail conditions and ethos, and providing personal views” about the hike and the AT.<sup>123</sup> Besides turning to social media communities, previous thru hikers find other ways to cement their connection to the trail.

---

<sup>121</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010) 171.

<sup>122</sup> Lindah Kotut, Michael Horning, Timothy L. Stelter, D. Scott McCrickard, "Preparing for the Unexpected: Community Framework for Social Media Use and Social Support by Trail Thru-Hikers," *CHI 2020*, (2020): 9.

<sup>123</sup> Kotut et al., “Preparing for the Unexpected,” 9.



Miller renews his connection to the trail by writing a guidebook, titled *The AT Guide*, that is updated yearly and includes mainly technical trail information. The guide covers all 14 states of the AT and includes information such as distances between shelters, water sources, and towns, as well as giving an overview of all the trail towns and the amenities.<sup>124</sup> Through this guide, Miller has forged a connection to the trail with every hiker who used his guide or followed his advice in preparing for their hikes. This follows the discovery by Kotut et al. that thru hikers impart their knowledge “onto other hikers on the trail by their role of giving advice coming from a voice of influence.”<sup>125</sup> Miller authenticates this influence through his multiple publications and continues to influence hikers more than a decade after his trek was completed. In this way, Miller can continue to feel connected to the AT in his work. This brings his experience full circle because Miller started the trail due to being unsatisfied with his job, finished the trail because he started and could not very well go back when he walked away from said job, and then turned the AT into his job so that he could continue doing what he loved.<sup>126</sup> Assisting future thru hikers is just an added benefit of doing a job that he loves and keeps him connected to the Appalachian Trail.

Others sustain their connection to the trail in different ways. Jennifer Pharr Davis used hiking to renew her connection to the AT. She thru hiked the AT twice more, setting the women’s speed record in 2008,<sup>127</sup> and hiked other trails with her husband, including thru hiking “the five-hundred-mile Colorado Trail” in 2009,<sup>128</sup> and set the overall speed record on the AT in

---

<sup>124</sup> David Miller, *The AT Guide* (Wilmington, AntiGravityGear, 2020).

<sup>125</sup> Lindah Kotut, Michael Horning, Timothy L. Stelter, D. Scott McCrickard, "Preparing for the Unexpected: Community Framework for Social Media Use and Social Support by Trail Thru-Hikers," CHI 2020, (2020): 9.

<sup>126</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 13-14.

<sup>127</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 256.

<sup>128</sup> Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa*, 256.

2011.<sup>129</sup> In the last chapter of her memoir, Pharr Davis mentions that she and her husband keep a list of hikes on their fridge in categories such as “day hikes, trails that [she] would love to set a record on, trails reserved for Brew [her husband] and [her] to do together, and – if one day [they] are blessed with children – [they] have a column for family-friendly hikes too.”<sup>130</sup> Hiking is vital to Pharr Davis’ connection to the trail because while others believe she is defined by her speed record, to her the thru hike that defined her was the first one. She mentions that it took her “four and a half months and 2,175 miles to find the answers” to why she was completing the trail the first time and to even answer how she was able to do it.<sup>131</sup> These answers are not shared in her memoir, but it can be inferred that they were important to her since she went back to the trail multiple times. Pharr Davis’s memoir records her interactions with individuals trying to set speed records on the trail, and it seems those were some of the thru hikers that intrigued her the most, and most likely inspired her to go for the speed records herself. She had proven to herself that she could thru hike the AT, but it seemed now the question was how fast she could do it.

In addition to continuing to hike, Pharr Davis has also created a business, Blue Ridge Hiking Company (BRHC), of guided hikes, both day and overnights, in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The BRHC also has a storefront and a bunkhouse for hikers.<sup>132</sup> By being a guide to prospective hikers, Pharr Davis is able to impart some of her Appalachian Trail knowledge to others, much like Miller with his guides, and falls into that mentorship role that Kotut et al. discovered a lot of completed thru hikers try to create. By being seen as the most difficult of the American triple crown, a completed AT thru hike does grant additional authority, especially

---

<sup>129</sup> Meghan Hicks, interview by Meghan Hicks, *Jennifer Pharr Davis Post-Appalachian Trail Record Interview*, I Run Far, 8 Aug 2011.

<sup>130</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 256.

<sup>131</sup> Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa*, 256.

<sup>132</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, “Blue Ridge Hiking Company,” Blue Ridge Hiking Company, 14 Oct 2021, <https://blueridgehikingco.com/>.

since the success rate is only twenty percent. Additionally, her dedication to the AT is shown through “The Trail-er Bunkhouse” that she runs, complete with a shuttle service.<sup>133</sup> It fits ten and can serve as a starting point for the BRHC, as well as for hikers, paddlers, and trail runners that come through Hot Springs, North Carolina.<sup>134</sup> The fee for the room includes the bed, linens, Wi-Fi, a hot shower, TV, kitchen, and more, and there is a gear rental option or a small shop to purchase items.<sup>135</sup> Pharr Davis has created a life around her connection to the AT by establishing herself in a trail town and by physically guiding hikers on the AT, even if just for a small section.

Grandma Gatewood connected back to the trail by hiking as well. She was one of the first people to ever thru hike the AT three times. Only “eight women and fifty-five men [had] completed three two-thousand mile hikes” in the almost four decades between Gatewood’s third thru hike and Montgomery publishing her story.<sup>136</sup> Besides sitting in the company of very few three time thru hikers, Gatewood also “pioneer[ed] three separate groups of AT hikers: seniors, women, and ‘ultra-light’” hikers, ultra-light hiking being an even more popular style of thru hiking now than when the text was published in 2014.<sup>137</sup> The idea that every ounce counts on the AT is a popular one that governs the gear decisions of many backpackers and prospective thru hikers, and it all started with a woman who wanted to walk for a while and her drawstring bag. One such ultralight piece of gear is a “lightweight rain cape that doubles as a shelter – the Gatewood Cape.”<sup>138</sup> In addition to continuing her hiking legacy, Grandma Gatewood also used

---

<sup>133</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, “Appalachian Trail-er Bunkhouse,” Blue Ridge Hiking Company, 14 Oct 2021, [https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse\\_reservation](https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse_reservation)

<sup>134</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, “Appalachian Trail-er Bunkhouse,” Blue Ridge Hiking Company, 14 Oct 2021, [https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse\\_reservation](https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse_reservation)

<sup>135</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, “Appalachian Trail-er Bunkhouse,” Blue Ridge Hiking Company, 14 Oct 2021, [https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse\\_reservation](https://blueridgehikingco.com/bunkhouse_reservation)

<sup>136</sup> Ben Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 200.

<sup>137</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 200.

<sup>138</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 200.

her fame to promote the preservation of the AT, so much so that there was an annual ceremony to discuss the AT and its pioneers, with her being a large part of it and her daughter Lucy speaking on her behalf after her death.<sup>139</sup> Gatewood had such an impact on the trail that there is a six-mile memorial trail in her honour in Hocking Hills State Park, Ohio, and an annual memorial walk in her memory that falls around the date of her last hike ever.<sup>140</sup> Montgomery recorded that when he attended there was a line at the trailhead one-hundred people deep waiting to participate in the memorial hike just “*to take a walk.*”<sup>141</sup> This demonstrates the impact Gatewood still has on prospective hikers and thru hikers. By being the mother of so many aspects of AT, especially with regards to inventing the concept of ultra-light hiking as that is the choice of many modern thru hikers, Gatewood has become ingrained in the culture of the AT. While the assertion on the cover of Montgomery’s text that she “saved the Appalachian Trail,” is correct, Gatewood is important to the history of the AT because she is one of the best representations that anyone can find themselves on the trail, regardless of age or ability. Gatewood’s connection to the AT lives on in every hiker who was inspired by her story, who decided to ultra-light hike, and even those who just love the AT like she did.

Years, even decades, after their first thru hikes, Miller, Pharr Davis, and Gatewood all have forged strong connections to the AT and made it part of their lives or memory. More recent thru hikers have not yet had the time to cultivate their connection to the AT and therefore are the ones suffering from this post-trail depression the most as they do not yet know how to continue the connection made on trail and maintain it over time like the others. A few weeks post trail, completed thru hiker @meas.k commented on her Instagram story how she is “missing the trail

---

<sup>139</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 200.

<sup>140</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 204.

<sup>141</sup> Montgomery, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*, 204. Author’s emphasis.

fiercely” now that she is settling back into “real life,” and that she misses her “tent and the freedom that comes with living out in the woods.”<sup>142</sup> The constraints of “regular” society can feel restrictive after so much freedom on the trail. This sentiment is shared by @feed\_aurora on TikTok, who opens the window as soon as she wakes up every morning because without fresh air, she feels like she is dying.<sup>143</sup> @feed\_aurora also noticed some significant changes after her attempted thru hike, mainly around how she treats herself. She comments in one video that she is taking better care of herself by eating better, and focusing on her physical and mental health, as well as how she listens to her intuition more since it was such a vital skill she honed on the trail that helps her not push past her limits or stay in an uncomfortable situation.<sup>144</sup> These are some small examples of recent thru hikers trying to stay connected to the trail and how they bring trail teachings into their everyday lives to keep that aspect of their thru hike alive. These comments indicate that there is a common belief that there are fundamental changes experienced on the trail that will always follow a thru hiker, and in that way the AT will always be a part of them.

A thru hiker is never truly apart from the Appalachian Trail, as they often find ways to keep their connection even after the hike is completed and they are back into their pre-hike routine. The way thru hikers connect back to the trail can vary from publishing guides and other texts, to inspiring others to hike while also hiking as often as possible, to little things like maintaining the body mindfulness cultivated on the trail, loosening the schedule restraints one places on themselves, or opening a window every morning for fresh air. Whatever a thru hiker’s chosen form of connection is, it helps to fight against post-trail depression and the feeling that they no longer fit into the world they left by creating a new space where they can carry over

---

<sup>142</sup> Kayla, “@meas.k,” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021.

<sup>143</sup> Aurora Blanchard, “@feed\_aurora,” TikTok, 19 July 2021.

<sup>144</sup> Aurora Blanchard, “@feed\_aurora,” TikTok, 27 July 2021.

aspects of their AT experience. It is not about fitting the mold exactly, but rather making space for who an individual is now that they have completed this huge task, such as making a business out of being a hiking guide, or inspiring conservation of the AT. These practices of continuous and renewed engagement with the AT contribute to sustaining the idea that the hike represents a definitive kind of human and personal experience, an experience that changes every hiker as they become a part of this distinct AT culture, even while the AT itself continues to endure in its rugged constancy—a constancy that as previously noted, does in fact change from year to year.

## Chapter Five: My Time on the Appalachian Trail

### (Pre-hike)

Stratton Mountain is my Springer<sup>145</sup>, and Mount Washington is hopefully my Katahdin<sup>146</sup>. My trip, a paltry two weeks compared to the twenty of most thru hikers, is, with hope, enough to allow me to understand the allure of thru hiking and the majesty of the Appalachian Trail. The beginning and end hikes on my trip are not chosen without purpose as they afford me the irony of their significance and history to the trail. Stratton Mountain, the birthplace of the idea of the AT will be the first in my series of day hikes. It will reward me with the same sight of the Appalachians that inspired Benton MacKaye, and hopefully will allow me the same inspiration for the next fifty miles of trails. To finish on Mount Washington is to continue following the footsteps and ideas of MacKaye, as the summit at 6 288 ft was originally planned to be the Northern Terminus of the AT as drafted in MacKaye's 1921 document.<sup>147</sup> As such, it seemed like a fitting end for my journey. In addition to that, it is my hope that the eight hikes leading up to Mount Washington, all varying lengths, and elevations, make for suitable conditioning to take on the difficult and dangerous ascent. A distinct lack of mountain ranges in Ontario has made training for the Appalachians difficult as most of my practice hikes or walks occur on fairly level ground. It will not be until Stratton Mountain that I will know if I have prepared enough and will set the tone for the remainder of my trip. As my planning becomes more and more complete with the purchasing and packing of gear, map marking, and thesis

---

<sup>145</sup> The Southern terminus for the Appalachian Trail, and therefore the triumphant beginning for NOBO hikers.

<sup>146</sup> The Northern terminus for the Appalachian Trail, and therefore the triumphant end for NOBO hikers.

<sup>147</sup> Benton MacKaye, "A Project for An Appalachian Trail," *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (1921): 4.

writing, I cannot help but become more and more excited. It makes me wonder how thru hikers hold off till their planned start date once it is all coming together.

### **(Post Hike)**

I have chosen to leave the previous paragraph in the final draft due to its ability to demonstrate that even the best laid plans go awry. While I started with stepping foot on Stratton Mountain and ended on the summit of Mount Washington, everything in between went a little differently. I would like to begin by saying that I am an experienced camper as it is something I have been doing all my life. I also have wilderness survival knowledge and orienteering ability, so the forest is something I have experience in. Despite that knowledge, I quickly learned that I was lacking in knowledge around the Green Mountains in Vermont, and they humbled me very quickly. The first day of the trip started off well enough, my girlfriend Nadia and I left her house in New York on time and we arrived at the campground in decent time to get everything set up. The sky was blue and sunny, with a few clouds, and we thought we were going to have a great start to our trip. There were a few missteps in the beginning, like not being able to light the stove or, after lighting it, the stove running out of gas, dropping the orange juice all over me, and potentially eating partially undercooked chicken, but those were easy to overcome with a good night's rest. However, the rain had other ideas. The thunder came first, rolling and distant but coming closer. As we raced to clean up dinner and get everything in the car, not wanting to bring any bears to our campsite, the tent was forgotten, and so were the open windows. The pouring rain could be heard coming over the mountain and there was no warning before we were caught in a torrential downpour. It had been raining for only a minute or two before I remembered the windows in the tent were open, but the damage had been done, the bedding and the sleep mats



were wet. We ended up having to get a room at a motel in the nearby town of Manchester, and so our first night in Vermont passed, but not in a tent as planned.

This threw a wrench in my meticulously planned schedule as we needed to sort out and dry the tent before we could take on Stratton the next day. This delay to sort out camp meant that our Stratton Mountain hike was not able to go on as planned. However, that did not mean the day was lost. I learned that day the value of mental recuperation, as well as physical, and the power of a hot meal. Instead of dry cereal and an apple like we had planned to eat, we got breakfast at the Little Rooster Café in Manchester instead, and it certainly helped our spirits. We also took advantage of the town's reputation as a trail town to gather some gear we found we needed, such as a new water bladder for Nadia and another dry bag for me. We also bought another tarp to try and stop the tent from leaking the next time there was a storm, and there would be many storms in Vermont. We were unknowingly in the path of tropical storm Elsa. While we often kept a close eye on the weather, we never knew how strong the wind was going to be or the extent of the rain, with the mountains assisting in keeping the storm cells unpredictable. However, I can say for certain that I was glad I was not thru hiking and at the mercy of the storm like Miller, who hiked during Hurricane Isabel; ours was just a measly tropical storm.<sup>148</sup> That will all come later though, for our second day on the trail we just had a thirty-minute drizzle, a thirty-plus degree Celsius day, and a steep climb to contend with.

We did not get to Stratton Mountain until two PM, putting us there during the hottest part of the day. Rain and not knowing where to start on the mountain delayed us till three, and then we set out. We no longer had the time to complete the gentle 7.8-mile hike to the top, something

---

<sup>148</sup> David Miller, *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (Las Vegas: Amazon Encore, 2010), 241.

that would take six or more hours, so we decided to go up the steepest route possible. Our route was a black diamond ski slope that was a part of the Stratton Mountain Ski club, and while it was short, it was also completely open to the beating sun. Unfortunately, the sun won that day, and we did not make it to the top. Knowing we had ten more days of camping and hiking to do, and too aware that doing too much could easily lead to heat stroke, we turned back after getting a little under halfway up the mountain. While we did not complete the hike as planned, I would still consider the day a success as we finally got out to hike and see the views. Since the ski slope was open, we were afforded similar views during the whole hike as we would have had at the top of the mountain. While the views were indeed breathtaking, I would not understand until later the desire Benton MacKaye had to walk over every mountain seen in the distance.

To keep the momentum from the previous day, we were up with the sun for day 3 and our first full mountain climb at Styles Peak. Styles was chosen to try and feel some of the isolation that thru hikers experience since it is not a very popular hike. While there were three cars in the parking lot when we got there, two looked like they had been there for a few days and one looked like it had just arrived, like ours, but we never saw the owners. Instead, we met three thru hikers, a single young adult, and an older married couple. The single hiker was moving at quite a pace, so we didn't stop to chat, but they were polite in their greeting and wishing us well on our hike. The couple, however, we stopped to chat with momentarily. We came across the husband first and asked if he was thru hiking. He commented that him and his wife were flip flopping, which is when a thru hiker does a certain section of the trail, in this instance Virginia to Maine, before going back down to where they started and walking in the other direction (Virginia to Georgia). We carried snacks just on the off chance we came across some hungry thru hikers, so

we offered him some. He politely declined as he explained that they had just restocked in Manchester, and he was carrying all the food but told us to ask his wife.

We met her a few hundred feet later and chatted for a few minutes. She revealed that they were between trail names: for a while he was “In A Hurry” and she was “In No Hurry” and thus they were “The Hurries.” However, a recent philosophical change had her husband adopt the same name of “No Hurry.” (They were still the Hurries in all of the registers up until that point though). This philosophical change can be seen as someone who transitioned from an end destination mindset, like Brill’s “peak-baggers” to someone more focused on the journey. Even though he was further ahead when we met them, this change in mentality would mean that there would be more frequent stops for her to catch up and less focus on logging twenty or more miles a day. The wife also gave me some wonderful book recommendations for other trail memoirs not necessarily on the AT, and we talked about *Becoming Odyssa*, the AT memoir by Jennifer Pharr Davis. The wife was a paramedic and had met one of the thru hikers who was on the trail with Pharr Davis during her first hike and around the time of the suicide.<sup>149</sup> This demonstrates how close knit the community is as the event had happened over fifteen years previous yet was still impacting the trail community. It also was a very concrete example of how small and interconnected the community is, and that by having this discussion I was also being looped into the community through six degrees of separation.

Further on in our discussion the wife disclosed that they started in Daleville Virginia and planned to make it to Maine before doing their flip. I had hoped to see them again in New Hampshire, but unfortunately our paths never crossed again. I did leave them a note at the shelter

---

<sup>149</sup> Jennifer Pharr Davis, *Becoming Odyssa* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 177.

at Ethan Pond if we had somehow gotten there before them, wishing them the best and leaving a contact, but I have not heard anything from them. We gave the wife some of our Honey Stinger energy waffles and headed on our way. Participating in this small bit of trail magic and having our first hike on the Appalachian Trail, made me feel closer to the community that I have been following and documenting for so long.

Besides meeting our first thru hikers, it was also our first successful climb. The view from the top of Styles Peak was stunning, and I was slowly starting to understand MacKaye's vision. I wanted to chase that view to the peak of every mountain and see how it changed. I also learned on that hike how the desire for that view can drive someone to the top, to completion. Unlike Stratton, where there was a beautiful view every time we turned around, Styles made you wait. As we trekked to the top we were teased with views between the thinning trees, but never given a glimpse of the mountains beyond without making it all the way to the top. Styles Peak was also a lesson in the inaccuracy of maps, signs, and guides, as none of the proposed distances for our hike were accurate; indeed, none were ever accurate for the whole trip. Google estimated 2.9 miles to the top and back, the sign at the trailhead put one way at 1.8, and my day hike book at 3.2 total. While the day hike book was the closest, it is still three years old and with the trail reroutes that happen every year, it has become inaccurate. The text was still accurate in terms of trail head locations and directions; it is just the distances that have changed. By the end of the hike my Garmin GPS watch recorded a total distance of 4.2 miles.

By the end of the trip, I realized why thru hikers do not put much stock in the miles hiked and instead just pick a shelter to stop at. Going the mileage you thought you needed to, only to find there's still more to go is a little disheartening. While the additional 0.7 miles from the trailhead to the top would have meant little to the thru hiker who is used to doing at least 15

miles a day, it felt huge to us. I have learned that if I were to do any long hikes in the future that I would leave the GPS watch at home because it takes too much away from enjoying the hike. I have learned that mileage is all a matter of perspective in the way that the distance to a shelter, viewpoint, mountaintop, etc. is measured by the steps taken, experiences gained, and only ever quantified by technology at the end of the trek, not the beginning. I fully experienced what Brill did when he “discard[ed] [his] pedometer” and just focused on the journey.<sup>150</sup>

Despite all that happened that day, it was still only 10am when we got back to camp. We took the time to make a hearty lunch, organize camp, and then that afternoon finally got to do some laundry. It turns out that if you want to tell how popular a trail town is, go to the laundromat. Thru hikers often only hike with one to two changes of clothes, if that, and thus do laundry at every opportunity possible.<sup>151</sup> It was there that we ran into a group of thru hikers I follow on TikTok called @hikerhypehouse.<sup>152</sup> In addition to the group of six or so, there were a few lone hikers stopped in town. This also confirmed that late June is late enough in the hiking season for NOBO thru hikers, like Hiker Hype House, to make it all the way up to Vermont.

Day four was a lot less eventful as it was a moving day, so we had to completely pack up and move everything from Emerald Lake State Park to Coolidge State Park. Thankfully the rain held off while we were packing and setting up again, but once it started raining at 7PM that night, it didn't stop until 6AM on day seven. While we were frequently checking the radar before, more than 48 hours of rain straight had us checking it even more frequently and hoping

---

<sup>150</sup> David Brill, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Harpers Ferry: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1990), 38.

<sup>151</sup> Emily Huntley, “@emilyonthetrail,” TikTok, 19 April 2021, [https://www.tiktok.com/@emilyonthetrail/video/6952913515199909125?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@emilyonthetrail/video/6952913515199909125?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1).

<sup>152</sup> Hiker Hype House, “@hikerhypehouse,” TikTok, 05 May 2021, [https://www.tiktok.com/@hikerhypehouse?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@hikerhypehouse?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1).

that the tent would not flood enough to get the sleep mats wet again. Thankfully the tent stayed mainly dry, but we needed to line the inside with towels to make sure the water didn't run towards our bedding or bags.

Our hike to Little Rock Pond was done in the rain because of the storm cell we were trapped in; however, that did not stop it from being one of the best hikes on the trail. This hike also taught me something, and that is the power of hunger to motivate a hiker through to the end of their journey. Since we had the habit of leaving early to hike in the morning, we would usually eat breakfast on the road. Short hikes meant that we would be done around lunch and therefore didn't bring anything more than snacks with us. The Little Rock Pond Hike was 4.86 miles long, and while it was rated easy in the book for the grade and it remained relatively level, we found it a moderate hike due to the technical difficulty of having to step from one rock to the next and avoid the sucking mud. It was very scenic and featured many small waterfalls along the way, including some on the trail itself from all the rain. It also required one water crossing, with dry feet managed by carefully stepping across the rocks. While the potential view of the Green Mountain rising from a small lake was part of the drive forward, it was also hunger that drove us, causing us to hike a mile in 22 minutes on the way back, knowing food was waiting. It is easy to see how hunger or just the desire for a full meal could propel a thru hiker forward a few extra miles one day if a trail town is on the other end.

This stretch of the AT would also be ideal for cooling off on a hot day as the water was shallow, sandy, and calm, as well as refilling water in the rushing creek that flows alongside the well-worn path. However, the trail was more popular, especially for weekend hikers, of which we saw many, with the Green Mountain Club operating a tenting area just off the pond. Any overflow from the tenting area could easily fill the two nearby shelters Big Branch and Little

Rock Pond Shelter.<sup>153</sup> This is important knowledge to have when thru hiking, or even going out for the weekend, because there are limited options when the shelter area a hiker had planned to stay at ends up being full due to an increase of hikers on the trail. If a hiker had planned to stay in a shelter but arrived too late, their options would be to squish in uncomfortably, pitch their tent nearby, or to continue to the next shelter.

Our first “zero day” was unplanned, but it came out of necessity and a need to recoup mentally. A “zero day” for thru hikers is when no miles are traversed on the trail, and they are most often taken in a town. For us, our zero day is when there was no trail or road progress. We just stayed in the tent. This day of the trip taught me that weather is the ruler of the trail, as it presents the most danger, and for us it has presented itself in cool temperatures combined with rain for maximum effect. While a little drizzle would not affect many thru hikers, the constant seep of water into our tent for the past 48 hours sapped a lot of mental energy. In addition to that I had thought I was catching a fever, but it managed to not take, thankfully. However, while we didn't log any trail or transition miles, we did go into nearby Rutland for a new tent, and New Hampshire proved drier as a result. Rutland is too far off the trail to be a trail town, but it is a good city for essentials. In a pre or post pandemic world it would most likely be a good place to spend a rainy afternoon, with a small movie theater residing in the historic looking downtown, but for us it was just good for supplies. We got our new tent and some more food before returning to the leaky tent and passing the afternoon playing cards or watching Netflix, small luxuries we could afford when not worrying about weight or phone battery life.

---

<sup>153</sup> David Miller, *The AT Guide* (Wilmington, AntiGravityGear, 2020), 173.

Day seven was another moving day, but this time we managed to log miles on the road and on the AT. Today was also the day we moved into our second AT state, New Hampshire. We only had one home base in NH, opposed to the two in Vermont, because the white mountains made all the hikes from the base equidistant in driving time, regardless of physical distance. The only hike that was out of the way was Wachipauka Pond, which we ended up doing on the way since it was supposed to be a good hike and was one of the preparation hikes for Mount Washington. We were lucky that this hike landed on a weekend, because the tiny, expanded shoulder that served as a parking lot for the trail head is also at the entrance to a hydro corridor. At this time the hydro corridor was under construction, meaning that 50% of the parking lot was full of equipment, but on a weekday, it would have been at 100% capacity, leaving us nowhere to park. The road was too hilly and too curvy to have parked anywhere else at the risk of causing an accident. This was something thru or long-haul hikers would not have to worry about and presented a unique aspect to our journey I had not considered before.

This hike was also the least accurate in terms of expected and real distance as well as grade. The hike was listed at 2.1 miles to the pond but in reality it was more than 3, and the grade was supposed to ascend for only a mile but climbed for 2.6. The longer and more strenuous hike than expected, paired with having to tear down camp, the three-hour drive, and the knowledge that we still had to set up camp at Moose Brook State Park, caused some tension in our hiking party. This was another lesson from the trail: if you have a disagreement with your hiking partner, it can be a long and silent few miles. Bill Bryson knew something about this, his frequent spats with his hiking partner Katz making for some long, angry, and silent miles on the trail.<sup>154</sup> Having a companion on the trail does come with many benefits though, such as less pack

---

<sup>154</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (Anchor Canada, 2015).



weight as items can get distributed more evenly, safety in terms of injury or illness, companionship during rough times, the ability to share the experience with someone you care about, and to have them there for moral support. Some hikers intend to hike alone and fall into a group, such as the members of Hiker Hype House, and others start and finish together, like the Hurries. It is all a matter of personal preference. Even when hiking in pairs or group there is still the opportunity for individual moments or reflection. To accommodate the various hiking speeds of a group or pair, there will be agreements made in the morning to wait every so often for the other person(s) to catch up, or to wait at a location or shelter. Mary Sands was an expert on setting these rules for her groups of girls during their hikes. This allows for the shared experience of hiking with the ability for self-reflection and to still feel the individual connection to the trail that many hikers feel. The key is to find the right balance.

After the hike it was still an hour or so to Moose Brook, made longer by the fact that we learned (via some flashing lights and a very nice state trooper) that license plate covers are illegal in NH, thus forcing us to try to find a store open after 5, and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, that sold wrenches. It certainly made for an adventure, and all it cost was 6 dollars and some time (thankfully it was just a warning from the trooper). With every detour or surprise on the trip I got to tell myself that it makes for a good story. It also served as a reminder of all the laws that thru hikers must research before their journey, as there are different rules regarding off trail camping, hiking permits, and other things as a hiker moves from one state, or even state park, to the next. After we finally made it to camp, it was time to set up and create our final home away from home. We had a new, slightly smaller tent that fit completely under the tarp so there was no chance of flooding this time, even if it started raining again. We were all too happy to leave most of the rain behind us in Vermont.

Some days you are able to conquer the AT, or at least a small section of it, and you feel on top of the world for it, but sometimes the AT wins. Day 8 was one of those days. The hike up to Lonesome Lake was moderately difficult, with many potential roots and rocks to trip over. It was perhaps the most dangerous trail section we had attempted since the rocks were slippery and at odd angles; the potential for a twisted or broken ankle was ever present. There were also the water crossings that made the section so dangerous and what ultimately prevented us from finishing. My partner turned back at the first one, feeling too uncomfortable to cross, and I turned back at the second significant river crossing that was much faster and deeper than the first. Without a partner for assistance or safe way to cross the water, I had to turn back a mile and a half from the lake. I had to prioritize safety and keeping my equipment dry over the river fording. This would have been a situation where trail shoes would be better than boots, because I knew if I got my boots wet, they would not dry out before the end of the trip. It had occurred to me about halfway down the trail on the way back that I could have taken my boots off to try the crossing, but the swiftness of the rapids and the slippery rocks would have still been too dangerous to attempt on my own at my level of experience. There is no record of the number of accidents, injuries, or deaths that occur on the AT as a whole, as it is mostly recorded by the park where the accidents happen. The White Mountains do have a larger record though owing to how dangerous Mount Washington is and unprepared individuals, I did not want to step out of my comfort zone and add to their tally. Despite not crossing the rapids, it was still a difficult and rewarding hike just to see the rushing river, but I do wish I could have made it up to the lake to see what it was like. The lake itself is supposed to be a great swimming spot, which would be great to cool off for hikers, and the number of small and large streams that cross the trail would be great for water resupply as long as you have a filter. However, it would be very difficult and

dangerous to complete this section of the trail during rainy conditions and there were sections where the trail was solely rocks and became slippery when wet.

Hiking without my partner was also a new experience. I am not sure I would like to repeat it since the whole time we were both worried about the other, and it is nice to have the added security of someone there to help if you injure yourself. It would have been different if the hike had started without a partner, opposed to one turning back, as I was then worried about my safety as I went up and her safety as she went back. I can see the benefit and drawbacks of hiking with or without a partner, and certainly believe it's a matter of personal preference. Some benefits are shared weight carrying, company, an extra pair of hands for camp set up or first aid, and the comfort of safety in numbers. Drawbacks can be added concern or worry, or, like Mary Sands and her girls learned, different hiking speeds cause the person with the food to move on too quickly and leave the others without.<sup>155</sup>

The day after Lonesome Lake was uneventful, a planned zero day that was just camp upkeep, laundry, and a trip into North Conway. North Conway is situated just south of Mount Washington and the intersection of State Road 302 and Highway 16. The former takes you to Crawford Notch at the start of the Presidential Range, while the latter will take you to the Mount Washington auto road, and Pinkham Notch Visitors Center, effectively the end of the presidential range along the AT. This makes North Conway a great tourist location, and regardless of what day of a week we were there, it was always busy. The large REI would be excellent for a restock of supplies for any thru hiker, but it was off the trail enough that they

---

<sup>155</sup> Mary Sands, *Appalachian Trail in Bits and Pieces* (Fourth Printing, 2000), 72.

would need to find a ride into town from the trail head. We did see two hikers while we were there another day, but the rest were drive in tourists like us.

Our final planned hike was up to Ethan Pond and Ethan Pond shelter. With a total climb of 1500 feet and a total distance of 7.5 miles, it was our longest hike and most difficult grade of the trip. We learned over our many hikes how to best pace ourselves on the ascent as to not tire ourselves out, something that would have been beneficial on Stratton, and that was certainly put to use here. It was an excellent hike to end on as it had some lovely views over the lake, said to be a favourite of Moose and Bears, though we saw neither, and it was a nice to finally see a shelter and surrounding camp. While we were not able to do an overnight trip, this would have been a good spot for it. However, when we looked all the AMC huts were full since they are booked online at a first come first served basis. Additionally, while the camp was certainly one of the better shelters, as it's run by the AMC and therefore has a constant caretaker, it was still just an open-faced lean-to with a sleeping platform, a few tent platforms, a cooking area, and an outhouse. What surprised me though was the size of the camp. During the accounts in the memoirs the impression is given that the overall camp area is fairly small, and while I am sure that can be the case with some shelters along the trail, that was not the case at Ethan Pond. The lean-to could easily sleep 12, and the two tent platforms would have been able to accommodate one ten person or two five person tents each. Unfortunately, it was empty of hikers when we arrived. While all the research said they had to be booked online, it seemed that the caretaker could take "walk-ins" if there was space. Now I know for next time so that I could bring the right gear and enjoy a night on the trail.

It was truly an experience to have our snack and flip through the shelter register, getting a feel for how thru hikers use it to convey messages to others. From just one entry we gleaned that

the Zealand falls hut AMC workers don't care for thru hikers, that there are leeches up to 3" long in the pond, and that there is a family thru hiking the trail with a 5-year-old, which I'm sure is no small feat. We left an entry of our own, reaching out to the first thru hikers we had ever met, wishing them well on their journey. A part of me did hope to meet them while we were here, but we were not destined to cross paths again. Since they were the first thru hikers we had met, I cannot help but to silently cheer them on in their journey to the end, hoping they will be in the 20% of finishers. Having accomplished such a difficult hike made me want to try Washington, but at the time my knees had been troubling me, and I am aware that hiking Washington unprepared in any way could spell death. Safety has been paramount on this trip, and it will continue to be for all my hikes in the future, so one of the deadliest mountains is no exception.

We had planned for two zero days in order to rest mentally and physically for Mount Washington that we were now able to use to still relax, but to also prepare the camp for our departure. Since we had taken my small hatchback, some reorganization was needed to ensure everything would fit back in the car with the ability to still see out the windows. We also explored the Pinkham Notch visitors center, operated by the AMC, and a good place to launch a hike up mount Washington or weekend in the Presidential Range. Since the visitor's center is run by the AMC, they allow hikers to pay for a stay in any of the trail cabins they have there, such as Zealand Falls or Lake of the Clouds, and they also have a little store that contains last minute gear, MREs, maps, and more. The most interesting feature of the center is the 3D topographical map of the range that they have in the center of the store, showing how the AT cuts through the range and all the side hiking trails. The map just reinforced my desire to hike the Presidential Range, something I can hopefully do next summer with a good friend of mine. My girlfriend decided that the two weeks we spent was enough hiking for her in the Green and White

Mountains, but she offered to be the safety vehicle for the trek. Knowing I would be back to complete the Presidential Range made leaving it at this trip a little easier, and I finally understand the call of the AT that so many thru hikers claim to feel.

Day twelve was full of rain as the last of tropical storm Elsa passed by. The dreary weather made doing trail magic all the better, as the surprise of snacks was even more of a pick me up for hikers in the wet and cold weather. We ended up at Crawford Notch instead of Pinkham Notch since the Crawford Notch visitors center is so far off trail and doesn't have the amenities for thru hikers that Pinkham does. At Pinkham snacks and hot meals can be purchased at the cafeteria located mere feet off the AT, but the trail crosses south of the Crawford Notch visitors center so the ice cream and hot dogs offered there are more for the vehicle tourists than thru hikers. We only had two long haul hikers stop by for snacks while we were there, either because of timing that made us miss everyone, or the poor weather that encouraged hikers to take a zero day. Regardless, it felt so great to assist in making the two hikers' day better and still be a part of the trail even though we weren't hiking it. The first hiker we had told us that she wasn't sure where she was going to stop for lunch that day and so our offer of a PB&J was much appreciated since she wouldn't have to try to lunch in the rain. The other hiker took lots of our available snacks including a stew meal and some instant coffee, and I felt better knowing he was going to have something filling and warm when the temperatures dropped that night. The interesting part of the day was that even though we only had two hikers, they were going in opposite directions. One was NOBO and heading into the presidential range, the other was SOBO and had just come from there. At the time, I wished I had more to offer than water and snacks, like a dry place to sit and recharge like the trail angel café, but I am glad that I was able

to experience that aspect of trail culture.<sup>156</sup> It felt like giving back to the trail in a way, participating in this linear community like we did is reinforcing the kindness the trail community offers and helped create lasting memories of the trail. I really like knowing that the few hikers we helped were buoyed by our surprise food and snacks, and that we might have helped get them to the next stage of their journey.

The final day of the trip was by far the best. We had booked a guided tour up Mount Washington, and it was the perfect day for it. Weather wise it was the perfect day to hike the Mountain as well and there were many people taking advantage of that. It was a cool sixteen degrees Celsius, and while the average wind speed on the summit of the mountain is approximately fifty-six kilometers an hour, that morning it was only twelve. It was also an extremely clear day, granting views for ninety miles and all the way into Maine. The tour was beneficial as our guide was very knowledgeable and it also reinforced the fact that we were not quite ready for such a difficult hike, since we could see sections of the trail near the top that were steeper than most of our previous hikes. However, getting to the top also reinforced in me the desire to do the whole presidential range as soon as I feel prepared. The view was incredible as well, and I once again understood Benton MacKaye's desire to trace the ridges in the distance. My girlfriend took a picture of me at the summit where all that's in front of me is clouds, and I want to chase the feeling that photo gives me, of being a ridge runner over mountain tops and cliffs. To be a ridge runner was not something I knew I wanted until I put it down in writing, but that is the best way to describe the desire of MacKaye's that I now share.

---

<sup>156</sup> Michael Dwyer, "@thetrailangelcafe," Instagram, 14 Oct 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/thetrailangelcafe/>.

In addition to having a wonderful tour and learning new things about the mountain, we were able to shorten our day of hiking. Cutting 6-8 hours off our Washington trip allowed for some other fun moments as well, such as visiting Glenn Ellis Falls, just down the road and past Pinkham Notch. The sign for the falls was one we had driven past a few times but not paid it much mind as most NH waterfalls are small and more rapid like. However, when our tour guide mentioned that it was only a ten-to-fifteen-minute walk and that it was a sixty-five-foot waterfall, we decided it was something we had to do. It was certainly worth the view and since it was not far off the beaten path it wasn't a worry that we had none of our hiking equipment. It was a short walk that made for a great last hike along the Appalachian Trail and in the White mountains.

Writing this account allowed me to immortalize the details of my trip, and in doing so will present me with something to come back to for future journeys along the AT in Vermont and New Hampshire, or just for future hiking trips. It also allowed for me to work out my feelings about the trip and the trail, which is certainly a benefit for thru hikers that write about their journey. From my experience, writing about the AT is an effort to retain the memories of the trail, to work out any feelings of the journey, and to try to share the affection hikers feels for the AT with as many people as possible. The Appalachian Trail is a magnificent and wild place, one with views that will never get tired and will take breaths away, and one that will challenge a hiker every step of the way. I believe that everyone should experience the Appalachian Trail if given the chance, regardless of how long they're on it or how far they go, because the AT brings a sense of communing with nature and a feeling of being a part of something that is larger than life. Unlike smaller hiking trails in Canada and the United States, the three crown trails; the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail, and the Appalachian Trail (the oldest and most difficult, albeit the shortest of the three), connect large swaths of land and thus to traverse the



trail is to be a part of something that traverses borders, large and small. The act of traversing borders seems so much more significant when it is your own feet that take you from one to the next and further demonstrates the power of thru hiking and the ability for it to make the mundane seem so valuable. The perspective change after hiking the AT is something that stays with hikers and is what makes the memoirs or social media posts so incredible to follow along and be a part of.

## References

- “2,000-Milers.” Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 11 May 2021,  
<https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-a-t/thru-hiking/2000-milers/>.
- Adkins, Leonard M., Victoria Logue, and Frank Logue. *The Best of the Appalachian Trail: Day Hikes*. 3rd ed. Birmingham, Alabama: Menasha Ridge Press, 2018.
- Appalachian Trail Conservancy. “@appalachiantrail.” Instagram. 17 Oct 2021.  
[https://instagram.com/appalachiantrail?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/appalachiantrail?utm_medium=copy_link)
- Berg, Adam. “‘To Conquer Myself’: The New Strenuousness and the Emergence of ‘Thru-hiking’ on the Appalachian Trail in the 1970s.” *Journal of Sport History* 42, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-19.
- Blanchard, Aurora. “@feed\_aurora.” TikTok, 03 Sept 2021.
- Brill, David. *As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013.
- Bromwich, David. “How Publicity Makes People Real.” *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 68, no. 1 (2001): 153.
- Bryson, Bill. *A Walk in the Woods*. London: Black Swan, 1998.
- Dwyer, Michael. “@trailangelcafe.” Instagram. 14 Oct 2021.  
<https://www.instagram.com/thetrailangelcafe/>.
- Dwyer, Michael. “@trailangelcafe.” TikTok. 06 June 2021.
- Foresta, Ronald. “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail.” *Geographical Review* 77, no. 1 (1987): 76–85. <https://doi.org/10.2307/214677>.

Garber, Sophia. “@sophiagarber.” Instagram, 14 Oct 2021.

[https://instagram.com/sophiagarber?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/sophiagarber?utm_medium=copy_link).

Herzog, Mary Jean Ronan. “Including Appalachian Stereotypes in Multicultural Education: An Analysis of Bill Bryson's A Walk in the Woods.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 123–28.

Hicks, Meghan. *Jennifer Pharr Davis Post-Appalachian Trail Record Interview*. By Meghan Hicks. I Run Far, 8 Aug 2011.

Kayla. “@meas.k.” Instagram. 14 Oct 2021.

[https://instagram.com/meas.k?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/meas.k?utm_medium=copy_link).

Kotut, Lindah; Horning, Michael; Stelter, Timothy L.; McCrickard, D. Scott. "Preparing for the Unexpected: Community Framework for Social Media Use and Social Support by Trail Thru-Hikers." *CHI 2020*, (2020): 1-13.

Lyons, Matt. “@SOBODoc.” Instagram. 14 Oct 2021.

[https://instagram.com/sobodoc?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/sobodoc?utm_medium=copy_link).

MacKaye, Benton. “A Project for An Appalachian Trail.” *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (1921).

Miller, David 'AWOL'. *2020 Northbound: The A.T. Guide*. The A.T. Guide, 2020.

Miller, David. *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*. Mariner Books, 2011.

Montgomery, Ben. *Grandma Gatewood's Walk: the Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2016.

Pharr Davis, Jennifer. *Becoming Odyssea*. New York, NY: Beaufort Books, 2010.

Potteiger, Laurie. “Trail Miles Throughout the Years Updated Thru 2021.” Chart sent via email. Harpers Ferry, WV, 2021.

Redick, Kip. "Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making."

*Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 41–51.

Sands, Mary. *Appalachian Trail in Bits and Pieces*. Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2011.

Shaffer, Earl V. *Walking with Spring: the First thru-Hike of the Appalachian Trail*. Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2004.

The Trek. "@appalachian.trail." Instagram. 14 Oct 2021.

[https://instagram.com/appalachian.trail?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/appalachian.trail?utm_medium=copy_link).

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Intended VT – NH Itinerary

28 Jun – 4 July: Vermont

- 28 Jun – 1 July: Emerald Lakes State Park Home Base
  - 28 June: Arrive and set up.
  - 29 June: Stratton Mtn.
    - 7.6 mi
    - Important start point as this is where the dream of the Appalachian Trail began as Benton McKay stood on the peak and imagined the footpath of America.
  - 30 Jun: Styles Peak
    - 3.2 mi
    - Short but steep, the hike will have views from the top all the way to the mountains in NH. Often not seen as a day-hike spot, hopefully Styles peak will be less trafficked and a similar experience to thru-hikers isolation will be revealed.
  - 1 July: Move to next campground.
- 1 – 4 July: Coolidge State Park Home Base
  - 1 July: Arrive and set up.
  - 2 July: Little Rock Pond
    - 4.8 mi
    - Easy hike, busy, but supposedly the most scenic hike of Vermont.
    - Could be done on the 1<sup>st</sup>, leaving one rest day on either the second or third.
  - 3 July: White Rocks Cliff
    - 4.6 mi
    - Scenic, can see all the way to the Adirondacks in NY when at the top.
  - 4 July: Move to NH campground

4 – 11 July: New Hampshire

- 4 – 11: Moose Brook State Park Home Base
  - 4 July: Wachipauka Pond and arrival/set up at Moose Brook.
    - On way to Moose brook will be stopping to hike Wachipauka Pond
    - 4.2 mi – shortest hike in NH
    - Good place to stop and swim, can be extended by 2 mi by following the old AT to the top of Webster Slide Mtn. If thru hiking the AT this would be a great place to cool off and wash some of the dirt off.
    - Continue to Moose Brook.
  - 5 July: Lonesome Lake
    - 7.4 mi

- Will pass two brooks on the way to the lake that sits high on the mountain. Total elevation gain is 1000 feet, but the grade is moderate.
- 6 July: Rest Day
- 7 July: Ethan Pond
  - 5.8 mi
  - More difficult hike with an elevation gain of 1500 feet but over a more gradual slope. Potential to see Moose or Bears at the pond.
- 8 July: Webster Cliffs or Rest Day (depending on strength or feeling)
  - 6.6 mi
  - Beautiful panorama at the top. Must ascend from Crawford notch, which is named after the father son duo who carved the first trail to the top of Mt. Washington. Crawford notch was also the first pass through the White Mountains, opposed to going around.
- 9 July: Rest and prep day for Mt. Washington
- 10 July: Mount Washington
  - Longest hike at 10 mi
  - Lots of preparation involved as the weather and trail conditions can be dangerous.
  - Must navigate 4 miles of rocks and open space, trail will be marked by cairns.
  - The grand finale of the trip.
- 11 July: break camp and journey home.

Totals:

Mileage: 54.2

Campgrounds: 3

Hikes: 9

## **Appendix B: Day Hike Kit List**

- Water bladder (3L)
- Empty water bottle for filtering into
- Gatorade
- Water filter
- Rain jacket
- Rain pants
- Buff
- First aid kit
- Feminine supplies
- P-style
- Kula Cloth
- Trail snacks
  - e.g., beef jerky, trail mix, Honey Stingers
- Hiking pole (one each)
- Sunscreen
- Bug repellent
- Hat (I prefer a ball cap over sunglasses because it can be too dark in the woods for sunglasses, and too bright in the clearings to not have something)
- Battery pack
- Maps
- Headlamp

## **Appendix C: Proposed Kit List for Longer Journeys**

### **Overnight Trips (all items from day hike list plus the following items)**

- Jet boil
- Sweatpants
- Sweater or extra warm base layer to save space (both are recommended for Washington)
- Sleeping bag
- Toque
- Gloves
- Extra socks
- Tent (can be replaced by hammock with bug net and/or tarp)
- Sleeping mat (can be replaced by hammock)
- Freeze-dried meals
- Utensils
- Cord to hang food/bags
- Change of undergarments

### **To Climb Mount Washington (all items above plus the following items)**

- Jacket
- Base layer bottoms
- Fire starter
- Tent (not recommended to be replaced by hammock)
- Sleeping mat (not recommended to be replaced by hammock)