

CHAPTER 1: I CONFESS, I'M A SECTION HIKER

I'm one of those other people. You know, the ones you meet on the Appalachian Trail who are NOT thru-hiking from Georgia to Maine, or vice versa. Not even close. We perhaps have a job, a family, or other responsibilities. In short, we have a life outside of the Trail.

They call us section hikers.

Which is how I found myself, very much alone and in the rain, ascending the mountain called Mahoosuc Arm in Maine in August 2005. I had just taken 4-1/2 hours to traverse the notorious mile of the Appalachian Trail known as the Mahoosuc Notch, a passage through an immense boulder field which requires skill, patience, and some acrobatic feats. It would also have helped if I had been 30 years younger. Anyway, it took me another 4-1/2 hours to climb the two miles or so up Mahoosuc Arm, owing to the fact that the rocks were slick with precipitation and I was not as agile as I used to be.

How I got there earlier in the day is simple: I had called local guide Art Jolin, of Gorham, New Hampshire, the day before. I booked a trip for him to pick me up at the Grafton Notch trailhead in Maine early in the morning, and deposit me at the Mahoosuc Notch trailhead off Success Pond Road, near Gorham, to start my 10-mile day hike. I knew better than to start down at Gorham and try to backpack in over the course of several days; I'd have no strength left after making my way through over 20 miles of the difficult Mahoosuc Range.

Since I had done a previous trip with Art's help, I had received some very good advice from him. "If you get through the Notch and it's on into the afternoon," he said, "be sure and make camp the first place you can, because you'll never get out to Grafton Notch the same day. It's that hard. I did that hike with some friends, years ago, and it was nearly the death of us. What happened was, one of the group insisted on bringing his dog along. We begged him not to, because a dog has real difficulty with some of the climbs, and jumps, and whatever else; a dog could easily break a leg or worse. But he wouldn't listen, and insisted on bringing his dog anyway. So we started through the Notch, and after a little bit the dog just lay down and wouldn't go any further. Now my friend had to carry the dog the rest of the way, in addition to the usual misery of working our way through the Notch. Maybe it wouldn't have been too much of a catastrophe, but this was not a little toy poodle or something. His pet was a full-grown Husky, must have weighed close to a hundred pounds. It took us over four hours to get through the Notch, so we ran out of daylight and had to camp overnight."

I listened very seriously to Art's advice. He'd been a native guide for hunters, fishermen, and hikers for most of his adult life, after all. So when I set out that morning in August, around 7:00 in the morning, I had an inflatable sleeping mat strapped to my day

pack. I had some extra food and an extra quart of water in the pack, in addition to the usual first aid packet, rain poncho, space blanket, and so on. Halfway up the Mahoosuc Arm, I realized that I was going to need every bit of it, because I was definitely not going to get down to Grafton Notch that day. Not only did the terrain force me to hunt for handholds and footholds on the rocks, but the radio weatherman had lied through his teeth. I would not have planned the trip if I had expected all-day precipitation, but here I was in the middle of it, and nothing to do but press on. At first I wore the rain poncho to keep dry, but then I found that the nice poncho that kept me dry was lousy for climbing. Every time I heaved myself up the next few feet of rock, I tripped over the thing. It snagged on branches, it bound me, and it prevented me from proceeding. Therefore, after the first half hour or so, I gave up and took it off. The rain wasn't that heavy; yes, I'd be damp, but at least I would eventually arrive at the Speck Pond shelter to spend the night. About halfway up, I spotted a dry space below some overhanging rocks, and thought about camping there, but something made me keep on going instead. Somehow it never occurred to me to pull out the 55-gallon trashbag from my pack and put it over my torso instead of the poncho; I would have stayed much drier, without impairing my freedom of movement. Should I ever find myself in a similar situation, I hope I'll think of this simple option.

Anyway, Mahoosuc Arm was a climb that seemed it would never end. When I finally gained the summit, I looked for the painted white blazes that marked the route of the Trail. They pointed straight off the edge of a 10-foot cliff. Now I know it doesn't seem that way, but I am really not totally foolhardy. I was not going to jump off that cliff. Looking ahead, I could see a sign indicating a trail junction down there, but I didn't have a feasible way to get to it. It was already 6:00 in the evening. Standing there, I was getting wetter by the minute. So I scouted around to the left; no way down from there through the thick brush. I went to the right and finally found more white blazes, leading safely down to the trail junction. Had the blazes been painted to indicate bearing to the right, I would have gone that way to begin with. As it was, I wasted ten minutes and finally got soaked to the skin.

After another hour of hiking, during which I covered another mile or two, I pulled in at the Speck Pond shelter. As only four or five other hikers were there ahead of me, there was still room for me to spread out my inflatable sleeping pad and sink to the floor, exhausted.

I had some extra food, remember, and an extra quart of water. So I wasn't going to be unbearably hungry or thirsty overnight. But, unfortunately, I hadn't counted on being soaking wet. I wished that I'd brought my wool shirt, which would have kept me warm in spite of being wet. But due to the continuing overcast, temperatures were only down into the fifties overnight, so I was fairly certain I wouldn't be hypothermic if I just used

the resources at my command. First, I had that accursed poncho, which would certainly hold in body heat. Second, I had a 55-gallon trashbag which always stayed in my pack for various purposes, none of them involving trash. I could place my feet and legs inside that bag and prevent warmth from escaping. Then there was the space blanket, a tinfoil-looking thing that I could wrap around myself to hold in even more body heat. Given all this, no, I wouldn't freeze overnight.

Unfortunately, all those things that held in body heat also held in moisture. Sure, I didn't freeze. But I wasn't comfortable either, and didn't sleep well in spite of the inflatable sleeping pad. When I opened my eyes at about 7:00 a.m., still miserably wet, the atmosphere still seemed rainy and dreary, so I closed my eyes again as the other hikers departed to begin a new day's trek. I must have dozed off, because when I opened my eyes again, it was past 9:00. The sun was shining brilliantly. I threw off my wrappings and emerged from my waterproof cocoon just as the shelter caretaker came over to investigate why one of the overnights had not yet stirred. I explained my plight, assured him I was in shape to continue my hike, and happily forked over the obligatory \$8 for the night's stay. After ten minutes in the sunshine I was pretty well dry. I ate some cheese crackers for breakfast, rolled up the sleeping pad, and departed up the Trail toward Old Speck Mountain. The climb was challenging, so when I reached a trail junction, I was greatly relieved to find that the Trail did not go over the summit. Yes, there was a spur trail I could take to the top if I so desired, but the Appalachian Trail went downward from that point toward Grafton Notch. Guess which option I chose!

I arrived at my truck in the Grafton Notch parking lot around 6:00 in the evening, having taken over eight hours to walk less than seven miles. And that's what it means to be a section hiker.

Most literature about the Appalachian Trail involves the thru-hikers who do the whole 2000+ mile Trail in one season, taking four or five or six months to walk in a connected, linear journey. Thru-hiking requires enormous stamina, meticulous planning, financial resources, and several other attributes that I don't even pretend to possess. I can't plan what I'm going to eat for supper three months from now, or how many miles of unknown trail I can hike on some day in the future. My mind just doesn't work that way. Yet I am a hiker, and I fell in love with the Appalachian Trail in 1988 in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I kept hiking new sections as I was able. In 2005, after the Mahoosuc Notch fiasco, I came to grips with the fact that I would never hike the entire Trail -- 2000 miles of it, yes, but not the whole thing.

Guess what! 90% of the people hiking on the Appalachian Trail are just like me, section hikers who are out for a day or a weekend or even a couple of weeks. Most of us will never walk every inch of the Trail, and may not care about doing so. We're not heroic, but we are in the majority. So I thought somebody should write about the Trail

from our viewpoint.

To put things in perspective, I'm in my late sixties now, and increasingly afflicted by rheumatoid arthritis. When I started hiking, in 1988, I was still in my forties, and I conditioned myself to do some of those 20-mile day hikes in the Smokies. In fact, I day-hiked all the trails in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park over a period of 3-4 years, and founded the 900 Miler Association to honor hikers who had completed all the trails in the park. In 1995 my son Andy became the youngest person to attain that honor, at age fourteen, after a couple of years of serious hiking and backpacking with me and my friends from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club.

But those days are in the past.

Over a period of four years or so, Andy hiked and backpacked well over 3000 miles with me and my friends, and we spent many days with pick and shovel doing volunteer work on the Appalachian Trail. It probably contributed a lot toward his personal development. When he graduated from high school, in 1999, he was a National Merit Scholarship finalist, one of only two out of a graduating class of 250. He was also an Eagle Scout, was about to earn his black belt in Isshinryu karate, and had participated in many extracurricular activities at his high school. He won an award for drama, was an officer in the Beta Club, art student of the year, drafting student of the year, competed on the school swimming team, and had played alto saxophone in the school band for 5 years. He accomplished so much in his high school years that he was named to Who's Who. More important, however, he won a scholarship to the college of his choice, which was Columbus College of Art and Design. (He is now a magna cum laude graduate, pursuing a successful career as a professional illustrator.) Anyway, if you know your geography, Columbus, Ohio is a long way from Knoxville, Tennessee, where we lived for many years. It also has no mountains.

Having lost my best hiking companion, I continued to hike and backpack on the Appalachian Trail in short segments, often by myself. In 1998, because of allergies in the workplace, I sold my successful printing business in Knoxville, Tennessee and took a job in foodservice. From that time on, I never had a weekend free, nor could I participate in the weekend activities I used to enjoy with the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club. With two sons in college at the same time, I had to maximize my earnings, and that meant working when the boss needed me – definitely every weekend, when foodservice establishments are busiest.

The friends I used to hike with were on a different schedule. I had Mondays and Tuesdays off; they had to work during the week. As for planning hiking expeditions with my retired friends, who could go most any time – the minute I mentioned the word "backpacking," they all ran for the nearest exit.

In November 1999 I did do a couple of sections of the Trail in Virginia with fellow

Smoky Mountains Hiking Club member Bill Jenkins, on a two-day backpacking trip. However, he had serious knee problems, and allowed as how that would be his last such trip. He'd been to the doctor for cortisone shots in order to function, but the doctor told him on a follow-up visit that he couldn't go out there and tear up his joints with the stress of backpacking again. "I wish I'd gone up to New England and done those difficult sections years ago, while I still could," he lamented. "Now I can't even do the easier sections."

That left me with a question. Did I want to do more miles of the Appalachian Trail? The answer was yes. Maybe I could complete 500, 800, or 1000 miles. I would have to figure it out for myself, because I wasn't going to get any real help or support from other hikers. There were a few ladies from the hiking club who were working on section hiking the entire Appalachian Trail, but their idea was to start at the southern terminus and do all the sections in exact sequence. They simply couldn't envision doing the Trail in Vermont when they hadn't finished Pennsylvania. The only trouble with that approach was that if I insisted on taking the Trail in strict northbound sequence, by the time I got to Maine, I'd be too old to walk. Also, their idea of hiking was to do day hikes, and stay in a cute little bed 'n' breakfast for the night. Do you know how much that costs? In New England it's about \$100 per night, and I didn't have that kind of money. (When I did go to New England to hike sections of the Trail, I was eating on \$3 a day. I was camping out, not staying in that \$100-per-night bed 'n' breakfast.)

So I took Bill Jenkins' advice, and made a plan that fit my personal needs and abilities. Because the most difficult sections of the Trail are in Maine and New Hampshire, I needed to do as many of those miles as possible while I was still ambulatory. I couldn't walk away from my family responsibilities, and my two sons in college, to thru-hike. What I could do was to take weekend backpacking trips in the southern half of the Appalachian Trail, not on Saturdays and Sundays, but on Mondays and Tuesdays. Then, on an annual vacation of two weeks or so, I could head up north and tackle the real challenges.

It took a few years to figure out this plan. First, I never envisioned doing the entire Trail, and I certainly never considered thru-hiking. Yet, at every point where I completed another 100 miles of the Trail, I found myself wanting more. As a section hiker, I could do as much of it as I chose, at my own pace, in whatever season suited me. I could also stop and take pictures whenever I chose. So why not go for it?

If you're in a similar situation, let me give you absolution: it is perfectly okay to hike sections of the Trail in whatever sequence you choose. You can take one year or 20 years to do it; nobody cares. If you want to day hike most of it, why not? Fact: when Benton McKaye and associates started building the AT, they never envisioned thru-hikers. They weren't sure it would be possible for anyone to hike the entire Trail in one

season, and that was not why they started the Trail. If you read the mission statement of the Appalachian Trail, you'll find nothing in it at all about thru-hikers. So, fellow blue-blazers, take heart. We are in the majority.

CHAPTER 2: IT STOPS BEING A TRAIL

In June 1998 I got a shock. It was the summer before my son Andy's senior year in high school. Because of my problems with severe allergies, the two of us had just spent six months in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and had returned to Knoxville, Tennessee at the beginning of his school term in January 1998. During the interim my middle son Richard had taken over the management of my printing business in Knoxville, sacrificing a semester or so of his college education to do so. Since a time in Colorado Springs showed me that my allergies were occupation-related, and not connected in any way to the polluted atmosphere in Knoxville, I consulted with Andy and agreed that there was no reason for us not to return to Knoxville. He could go back to his old high school (and a multitude of high school friends) after a semester's absence, and be richer in experience for the influence of a different band teacher, a different English teacher, and a different art instructor.

In June, then, Andy had completed his junior year in high school, and was free to do whatever he wanted for the summer. We planned a hiking vacation on the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire, so that if we never got to do the whole Trail, we would at least have seen some of the highlights. From the guidebooks and maps, I picked out several of what I thought would be the most scenic hikes. Andy and I headed up to New England, taking a detour in Stockbridge, Massachusetts to visit the Norman Rockwell Museum. We found a campground near the Vermont-New Hampshire border and figured to do a fairly easy day hike the next day, from Three Mile Road down to Hanover, New Hampshire.

The network of country roads near Hanover is a confusing one, even with the aid of maps. As is too often the case, the road maps don't show enough of the Trail, and the trail maps don't show enough of the roads. After several wrong turns, we did find the small trailhead parking lot on Three Mile Road, where Andy dropped me off to start hiking. He then drove back into Hanover, parked our vehicle in the supermarket parking lot, and started hiking toward me from that end of the 8-mile section. Presumably we'd meet in the middle.

As it happened, Andy got off the Trail somewhere in the middle, and we never did meet. Light rain commenced after a couple of hours. Somehow he hadn't packed his raingear, but I later learned that he hauled out the space blanket from his first aid kit and used it to stay dry. Anyway, I was distinctly uneasy when I approached Hanover and still saw no sign of my son. Yet our vehicle was in the parking lot, so I knew he hadn't met with misfortune on the drive into Hanover. Since I had a spare set of keys, I was able to get into the vehicle and drive back to the Three Mile Road trailhead. He wasn't there either. It seemed to me the best thing I could do was to sit there awhile, at the spot where

he expected to find me. If I left, and he showed up, then both of us would be worried. But where could he be?

After fifteen minutes or so Andy came walking down the road and threw his pack into the back of the vehicle. Although he'd gotten off the Trail, he'd reached a road very shortly and figured out pretty well where he was. Though he didn't know exactly how to get back on the Trail, he was able to roadwalk back to the Three Mile Road trailhead, where I was waiting. Thus we had an introduction to the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire, hiking a deceptively easy section which was certainly not typical of New Hampshire terrain.

The next day we tackled Smarts Mountain, a few miles to the north of Three Mile Road. I dropped Andy at the trailhead on Highway 25A, from which point he would hike 14 miles across Mt. Cube and Smarts Mountain to the Lyme-Dorchester Road trailhead where I planned to park. Did this go according to plan? Well, not exactly. In the first place, I found the Dartmouth Skiway and parked there to start walking. After a couple of fairly easy miles, I arrived at the trailhead parking lot on Lyme-Dorchester Road where I should have parked in the first place. Okay, so I was going to do sixteen miles that day instead of fourteen. These things happen. But when I started up Smarts Mountain, I got bogged down quickly in the strenuous process of rock hopping up Lambert Ridge. It was fun, and I could see views of the fire tower at the summit. However, it seemed to be taking forever to cover those 3.8 miles of Trail. Around 2pm, still not at the summit, I met Andy. He had covered 10 miles while I completed less than six. Did I want to try to hike over 10 more miles before dark? I didn't think so.

"Andy," I said, "I'm not going to hike through to Highway 25A. I'm just going to go to the fire tower and hike back down. But if you wouldn't mind, I need you to walk an extra two miles to the Dartmouth Skiway and bring the vehicle up to the trailhead, because your idiot mother parked in the wrong parking lot."

He cheerfully agreed. I continued up to the fire tower, took a couple of pictures, and went back down to the Lyme-Dorchester Road trailhead. Despite walking the two extra miles, Andy was in the parking lot waiting for me when I emerged from the woods.

But nothing could have prepared us for our real adventure on the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire. After the Smarts Mountain hike on a very warm day, which wore me out, we took off the next day and did laundry, toured the area on four wheels, and scouted out the approaches to our next hike. I figured we couldn't say we'd been on the Trail in New Hampshire unless we hiked the rugged high point of Mt. Washington. There's a road up to the summit, and there's also a cog railway. We figured if we bought a cog railway ticket up to the summit, we could do a fairly easy hike back down to the point where the Trail crosses the road, then roadwalk another two miles back to the vehicle. According to the guidebook, we had to hike only 11 miles of the Trail between

the summit of Mt. Washington and the road crossing, and those 11 miles were downhill practically all the way. How long could that possibly take?

Try 11 hours.

We started down from the summit a little after 10am. After a couple of hours, it dawned on me that we were covering only about one mile per hour, due to one important factor: there was no trail.

Every 50 yards or so, there was an immense rock cairn to mark the route. We would sight on the next cairn and stumble toward it over rough rocks. As far as putting one foot in front of the other and walking, forget it! I had done a lot of rock-hopping in the Smokies, up and down creeks and such, so I knew how to keep my balance. But it was just not possible to make time picking my way over the endless jumble of this pathless rockpile. As we approached the Mt. Madison hut, around 4:30pm, I remarked that we were about to descend below treeline at last, where surely the terrain would be easier. But the so-called Trail then plunged over 1000 feet in half a mile or so, making it difficult for me to remain upright and avoid injuring my aging joints. I couldn't simply leap down from one rock to another the way younger people probably do. I had to watch my step to make sure I didn't come down too hard and injure a knee or turn an ankle. Andy? He could have done it much quicker by himself, I'm sure, but he stayed with me just in case I might need assistance. Because of the relatively short length of the hike, we hadn't brought enough water. Luckily, it was one of the longest days in the year. Around 8pm we had the following conversation:

MOM: "Well, according to my calculations, we have another two miles to go. At our present pace, I guess we'll be hiking that last mile by flashlight."

ANDY: "No, we won't. I forgot the flashlight."

But the terrain did become easier at that point. Although I was dehydrated and pretty well exhausted, I managed to keep moving. As the last rays of twilight ebbed, we encountered a sign. It said something about entering or leaving the Pemigewasset Wilderness.

Andy called out: "Hey Mom! Where do they put signs like this? Huh?"

"Close to the road, usually," I admitted.

Sure enough, we crossed a footbridge and found ourselves at the road. I sent Andy ahead to bring the vehicle up as close as possible to the gate, since the road is closed at night. Walking the last two miles down to the vehicle was nothing – gravity carried me, and besides, it was the first time all day I'd been able to put one foot in front on the other and walk.

I had done many grueling 22-mile and 25-mile hikes in the Smokies with my friends, but those expeditions didn't wear me out any worse than this 11-mile downhill hike in New Hampshire. I have a theory about the Appalachian Trail in the northernmost

sections:

Somewhere above the Vermont-New Hampshire border, it stops being a trail. It becomes an obstacle course.

Some of my southern friends who think they can start in Georgia, hike a certain number of miles a year, and eventually mathematically wind up at Mt. Katahdin in Maine have a surprise in store. Those of us whose biological clocks are loudly ticking cannot wait to hike the hardest part of the Trail when we are well past our prime physically. In my own case, like my friend Bill Jenkins, I suffer from arthritis. I lose a certain measurable amount of function each year. In fact, when I went back to New Hampshire in 2005, I was noticeably less able to cope with rock climbing and rock hopping than I had been in 1998. My right hip gave me pure misery some days and nights. My right knee ached unbearably at times.

For anyone who plans to section hike the entire Trail, I can't stress this enough. The Trail in many parts of New Hampshire and Maine isn't just "difficult" – it really isn't a trail at all. It's a marked route for us to follow any way we can. Apparently, in the early days of establishing the Trail, the New England contingent set a goal of crossing a maximum number of mountain summits. Personally, backpacking the Mahoosuc Range on days when the temperature on these summits reached 90 degrees, I didn't see the point. The panoramic view from one summit was pretty much like the panoramic view from the last one, and one bare summit seemed as unbearably hot and insect-infested as the last. Why not bypass some of those summits and let a hiker make some time?

On the other hand, not too long ago I read something in the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's new mission statement that still has me scratching my head. It was a commitment to make the Appalachian Trail "more accessible." I have no clue what that means. I would settle for "more walkable."

Maybe they mean more trailheads?

Maybe they think we should construct a ski lift to transport hikers up Mt. Katahdin?

Anyway, I don't mind a challenge. I just think hikers who plan to do the entire Trail should understand that much of what they do in Maine and New Hampshire is not walking. It is rock scrambling, rock climbing, slipping and sliding. God bless the Maine trail crews who construct the best rock steps on the entire Trail. I've heard hikers complain about the difficulty of the steps. My response is always, "How would you like to try to do it without the steps?"

If they could build about 5000 more steps, the Trail in Maine would become walkable. As it is, don't expect to walk it. I met a fellow coming through the Bemis Range who said he had hiked other long distance trails in the United States, and in his opinion, this wasn't a trail. I assured him that once he reached the New Hampshire state line on

his southbound hike, he would find things more to his liking.

Whenever I've hiked the other trails in the area, they have uniformly been walkable. The Crawford Path Trail, which intersects the Appalachian Trail halfway up Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, is not too much different from the trails I've hiked in the Smokies. The Mahoosuc Notch Trail, leading up to the Mahoosuc Notch, is a nice trail. I've enjoyed all the side trails, and wished the tread would be as walkable once I reached the AT. Time after time I've noticed the profound difference in quality between the AT and other, connecting trails. Why is the AT a rockpile while the connecting paths are so much nicer?

It's the summit mentality, believe me. On many of those high points there simply is no place to put a real trail.

To date I've traversed all the Trail through Maine except for a little 10-mile stretch of swamp up near Mt. Katahdin, and the last two miles of Katahdin itself. When I took two weeks to go up to Maine and hike in June 2002, I vowed to tackle Mt. Katahdin first. After driving roughly 1300 miles in 35 hours, I reached the gate at Baxter State Park before 8am, paid the fee, and received the advice that it was going to be a windy day, so maybe I wouldn't want to go all the way to the summit.

I did manage to complete the first three miles or so. The first mile is relatively easy trail; after that, the steep route follows a long stretch of stone steps, then deteriorates into a climb over rocks and roots, challenging hikers to find handholds and footholds. I hiked along with a couple from Michigan who were vacationing in the area and wanted to climb Katahdin for an unforgettable experience before returning to the flatlands. Although it was June, there were patches of snow on the ground, and the atmospheric temperature was down into the 30's, according to the keychain thermometer I always carry. I hadn't thought to bring my insulated waterproof winter gloves, so my hands were cold and damp in their knit gloves.

Treeline was the decision point. When I emerged from the cover of vegetation into a howling wind, I thought about the final two miles of climbing bare rocks. I put on my rain poncho for warmth (yes, the same poncho that was to cause me grief on Mahoosuc Arm Mountain three years later.) Unfortunately, I couldn't seem to get it secured so it wouldn't flap in the wind. This was not a steady breeze, but a series of 60-mile-per-hour gusts. If one of those gusts hit me at the wrong time, when I didn't have both feet on the ground, I could literally get blown off the mountain. I didn't think it was safe for me to proceed by myself. My Michigan companions opted to turn back. Regretfully, I followed them back down to the trailhead, during which time I was passed by a young couple who had been to the top.

The temperature back at the trailhead was around 70 degrees. Wind chill at treeline was undoubtedly in the single digits.

Stowing my day pack in the back of the truck, down in the parking lot, I spotted the couple who had passed me on the Trail, and offered them a cold soft drink from my cooler. It turned out the young man lived in Dexter, Maine, and was a crew leader with the Maine volunteer trail crews. I complimented him on the stone steps, and he described in some detail how his crew had used a griphoist to lift enormous boulders from the river below. I noted that I had seen the drill marks where they had used dynamite to blast apart the halves of the boulders to produce two fairly flat surfaces for the steps.

"How was the hike to the top?" I asked.

"If I hadn't had him to hang onto," the female said, "I couldn't have done it. The wind was so scary."

This gave me a clue that I had been wise to turn back when I did.

"Well, how was the view?" I asked.

They looked at one another. "Uh, it was all fogged in. Couldn't see a thing," one of them told me.

So, what did I miss?

CHAPTER THREE: WHITE VS. BLUE BLAZES

There are many traditions among Appalachian Trail hikers. One is the concept of "white blazing," in other words walking every inch of the Trail's route, marked by blazes of white paint on the trees, rocks, fenceposts or road bridges along the way. I don't know whether anyone truly "white blazes" the entire Trail. Thru-hikers unavoidably miss a blaze or two in spite of their best efforts. The next category is the "blue blazer," who basically hikes the entire route of the Trail but may skip a few yards here and there or take an alternate route for a few miles. Example: a friend of mine from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club was a 1993 thru-hiker. But he couldn't complete a section through Bear Mountain State Park in New York because of a forest fire which closed the Trail for the season. So he had to bypass it to continue on the Trail.

The other category of thru-hiker is the "yellow-blazer," who isn't serious about hiking the entire Trail in a linear sequence, and is not above hitchhiking ahead and bypassing a section of the Trail altogether.

I'm a confirmed blue and yellow blazer. As a section hiker, I've relied on car shuttles and keyswap arrangements to cover sections of trail (more on this later.) When I prepare to hike a new section, I drive to the trailhead in my pickup truck. Maybe I have someone to drop me off at the other end of the section to hike toward my truck, if I'm lucky. Maybe I have to hike out and return by the same route, traversing the same territory twice. If I feel lazy one day, I'll do a shorter hike or just do my laundry.

The advantages of blue-blazing are many, but the main thing is that I don't have to plan everything to the Nth degree, as thru-hikers do. In September 2005, as I prepared to camp in my truck at the remote trailhead on Vermont Highway 12, a thru-hiker approached me.

"Hey, I'm needing a ride to Hanover, New Hampshire," he said. "I have to pick up a package at the post office. I just realized it's Labor Day weekend, and this is Friday night. It's over 20 miles of trail to Hanover, but if I'm not at the post office tomorrow morning to pick up my package, I'll have to wait till Tuesday. I can't afford to lose two whole days on the Trail. Can you help me?"

"Well, I wasn't doing anything else anyway," I admitted. "With gas at \$3.59 a gallon, if you'll contribute \$7 for two gallons of gas, yeah, I'll haul you to Hanover. You got someplace to stay there overnight?"

"Not exactly, but if you can drop me off on the main drag, I'll make some connections and somebody'll have a bed for me for the night."

So I drove him 24 miles up to Hanover, and let him out with his pack on the main street. If he'd tried to get there on foot before noon Saturday, he'd have had to walk half

the night. If he'd tried to hitchhike, well, good luck getting a ride on a really remote country road in Vermont after dark. And undoubtedly that package he had to pick up at the post office contained dried food, the appropriate maps, and other indispensable items without which he could not hike the next 50 or 100 miles.

As I drove off after letting him out, I thought how much better it was for me to have all the supplies I needed in the back of my truck. I didn't have to be at a certain place at a certain time in order to proceed with my hike. Blue blazers have options.

A day or two later, as I was backpacking several miles south of Hanover, down in Vermont, I met this same hiker at one of the shelters. He told me he had found a place to stay that Friday night, and had picked up his supply package at the post office the next morning. He was now hiking through that stretch of the Trail he'd missed by skipping ahead to Hanover.

As I backpacked through the northern part of the Trail in Vermont, I met two ladies from New Hampshire who were in the process of backpacking for a month or two in a southbound direction. We met three times in all, as I hiked different sections in different directions, and had time to converse on a variety of subjects. One thing Preacher and Pi told me was that they had spent half the winter drying food in preparation for their expedition. Just like the thru-hikers, they had to make their way into town at certain points to pick up supply packages at the post office. When I met them near Peru, Vermont, they had just picked up a package. They were also waiting for a friend to come pick them up and transport them to a nearby location to spend the night.

By contrast, I really like the convenience of having my own little pickup truck at the end of my hikes. Not only can I drive to whatever trailhead I choose, at whatever time I choose, but I can haul all my supplies and reload the pack for a 2-3 day backpacking trip anytime. Should I need more supplies, I can drive to the nearest town and purchase them at a discount store. I can shop at the supermarket and cook delicious meals on the tailgate, in contrast to the dried-food fare and occasional restaurant meals backpackers must consume. I can also take a zero day whenever I need it, to do laundry, view attractions off the Trail, or just plain rest. Best of all, I have a sleeping space laid out in the back of the truck, with several foam pads and two sleeping bags, which I can adjust according to the temperature. I can pull in at any campground and camp comfortably in the back of the truck, without even needing to pitch a tent. There are numerous state parks where camping fees are nominal. There are places one can camp free. For example, when I'm on the road, I don't mind pulling into an Interstate rest area to snooze for a few hours. Those areas usually have a 24-hour attendant, and are patrolled by state police, so I feel safe – and there are rest rooms besides.

When I spent two months hiking the Trail in 2005, I never bought a single restaurant meal. Before leaving Knoxville, Tennessee to start my odyssey, I purchased a

compact, single burner Coleman dual-fuel stove. It took up no more space than my rain jacket, but when I added a little skillet and a very small saucepan, I was able to cook an amazing array of meals, with the aid of my cooler, which refrigerated the ingredients. I never spent more than \$5 a day on food.

When I say that I never bought a restaurant meal, that is technically true. However, I should mention that at one point I gave a ride to a fellow section hiker who had not had the foresight to bring along a vehicle. I drove him around Gorham, New Hampshire, and then transported him to Andover, Maine to spend the night at the Pine Ellis hiker hostel. It seemed that he wasn't making swift enough progress through the rugged Mahoosuc Range, and needed to be in Andover at a certain time, perhaps to pick up a package at the post office, perhaps for some other reason. I was leaving the Trail to hike down Peabody Brook Trail to the road, and thence to my truck, instead of spending two more hellish days backpacking the Mahoosuc Range down to Gorham, New Hampshire. Since our needs more or less coincided, I agreed to take him along, and then transport him to Andover, where he needed to be. In appreciation, "Choo-Choo" (from Chattanooga, Tennessee of course) insisted on buying me lunch. So we pigged out at the Pizza Hut in Gorham. But aside from that, I never ate a restaurant meal in over two months, not even an order of Chicken Tenders in Burger King's drive-thru.

After an extended conversation with Choo-Choo, he said that next time he came north to do a stretch of the Trail, he was going to have a minivan at the trailhead.

A few days after this episode, I was scouting out the trailhead on Highway 2 near Gorham, New Hampshire when a thru-hiker came out of the woods at twilight. He had hiked the entire 21 miles or so between Pinkham Notch and Highway 2 that day, rock climbing and all with his ultralight pack. "Where do you plan to spend the night?" I asked.

"I'm going to stay at the Hikers Paradise Motel in Gorham," he replied.

I looked at how dark it was getting. "Hey, take a load off, I'll give you a ride," I said. I knew it was a ways, but when I checked my odometer, I saw it was actually five miles from the trailhead to the motel. Lone Star's feet were so beat up by that super day, he didn't need to walk another five miles to get to the motel. "I'm going to take a zero day tomorrow," he said. "It'll be only my second zero day since I started the Trail in Georgia in May, but this day was so tough I need a rest."

I sympathized. When a thru-hiker comes out of the woods, needing some of the amenities of civilization, he still has to figure out how to get to town. Often he can arrange a ride back to the Trail, but there's a lot of time spent walking offtrail. Suppose a thru-hiker's boots wear out and he needs a new pair – this can be a major inconvenience.

For example, my first day on the Trail in August 2005, I lost the soles of both boots crawling (yes, crawling!) over the summit of Bald Pate Mountain in Maine. I looked at my

left foot as I clambered over a rock formation, and noticed that the sole was separating from the boot. *Better take it easy on the left foot*, I thought. *I've got a few more miles to cover to get down to the trailhead at Grafton Notch*. I got out my flashlight and placed it in my pocket, knowing I'd need it before I got down off the Trail. Sure enough, when I had worked my way down to within a mile of the parking lot, the left sole came off entirely, and the right one was flapping. It was also getting pretty dark, so I pulled out the flashlight and found that I had inadvertently turned it on in the process of putting it in the pocket. The batteries were nearly gone. I made it down the last mile, with sparing use of the flashlight, walking on my Dr. Scholl's gel insole on the left foot. I was gellin' – and propellin' myself down that last difficult stretch.

Next morning, in the daylight, I examined the worn-out boots. I decided they weren't worth repairing, and tossed them in the nearest dumpster. But where to get a new pair? Grafton Notch is miles and miles from the nearest shoe store or outdoor store. Had I been thru-hiking with no vehicular support, I would have had a tough time of it. Nearby Andover, Maine is a small town with virtually no stores. I drove over 20 miles to find a Labonville outdoor outfitters store. Their selection of hiking boots wasn't extensive, but they did have some sturdy Wolverines. "Do you have 8 wides?" I asked.

Miraculously, they did stock wides, and had my size. Considering how well-made the boots were, with all the features I wanted, and considering that they cost only \$72, I figured this was a bargain. I put them on and hiked on down the Trail the very next day. As far as break-in, I remembered the advice of Frank Carter, a fellow hiker from the Retired Citizens of the Smokies. Coat the feet with Vaseline before starting a hike, and you'll never have blisters.

My feet didn't smell too good for the next few days, as I backpacked through the Mahoosuc Range, but I didn't get blisters.

Now think about my predicament if I'd been a thru-hiker with no vehicle at the trailhead. I would have had to find a ride into Andover, probably to stay overnight at one of the hiker hostels. Then I would have had to figure out a way to get to the nearest outfitters store, many miles away. It would have been a major inconvenience. As it was, I drove to the place I needed to be, and drove back to the Trail to start my next adventure.

How else could I have managed central Virginia and Shenandoah National Park?

When I was hiking the Trail through Shenandoah, in October 2002, I was living and working down in Knoxville, Tennessee. I had Mondays and Tuesdays off. Therefore, when weather seemed good, I would take off after work Sunday night and drive up Interstate 81 (allowing a few hours to sleep at rest stops here and there.) By 9am Monday I'd be at Shenandoah, ready to hike. Because the Trail crosses Skyline Drive so frequently in Shenandoah, it wasn't hard to find crossing points. Basically, I'd choose a section of 20+ miles to hike, from Point A to Point B. If I had to carry my overnight pack, I would be able

to complete only a few miles a day. But if I could do most of the hike carrying just a few pounds in a lightweight day pack, I could do nearly twice the miles. First I'd drive to a point where the Trail crossed the road somewhere in between Point A and Point B, and I would take my overnight pack a short way into the woods and hide it for later. I had a camouflage pattern poncho with which to cover the pack. If I stacked a couple of branches and a handful of leaves on top, nobody could see it from ten feet away, and the wild critters never bothered it.

I would then drive to Point B to meet my shuttle person, leave the truck, and have my shuttler drive me to Point A to start hiking at perhaps 10am. I'd cover anywhere from 10 to 14 miles the first day, carrying my lightweight day pack with lunch and water. When I reached the spot where my overnight pack was hidden, I'd pick it up and find a campsite for the night. Next morning I'd pack up the overnight gear and hide it again for later retrieval. I would hike on up the Trail a second day with my day pack, maybe 8-10 miles, ending my hike at the truck. I would then drive back to the convenient road crossing and walk a short ways into the woods to retrieve my overnight pack, and head for home, back down Interstate 81 and Interstate 40 to Knoxville. This allowed me to do a maximum number of Trail miles in the easiest fashion, and I completed Shenandoah in five hikes on five different weekends, without taking a vacation from my job or relocating.

Car shuttles can be a life saver. From one end of the Trail to the other, there are usually people who will transport hikers from one trailhead to another for a nominal fee. Sometimes a taxi service is available. Hiking through 60 miles of the Trail in Pennsylvania on a week's vacation in August 2000, I was very grateful to find a Yellow Cab in a neighboring town. The way it happened, I hiked over seven miles from the Highway 225 trailhead down to Duncannon one morning, pulled in at the Riverfront Campground, and arranged a shuttle back to my vehicle at the trailhead. With four wheels under me again, I then drove to the trailhead at Clarks Valley and set up my tent at a campsite close to the road. After having lunch in town and resting a bit, I drove back up to the Highway 225 trailhead and started walking toward Clarks Valley about 3:30. I completed that over-nine-mile stretch before dark and crawled into the tent for the night.

Since I awoke early the next morning, and didn't feel any worse for wear, I decided to go for it and hike another 17 miles that day, carrying only a water bottle and lunch, up to Swatara Gap. The Appalachian Trail Thru Hikers' Companion listed someone in nearby Lickdale, PA who was available to do shuttles. I figured if I hiked to the trailhead at Swatara Gap, I could make a phone call and get a shuttle back to the Highway 225 trailhead where my vehicle awaited. After all, there was a state park at Swatara Gap, so surely there would be some facilities.

In reality, when I came out of the woods at Swatara Gap that afternoon around

4pm, down to my last ounce of water, I received a surprise. There were no structures, no pay phones; I found nothing but a sign indicating that this was Swatara State Park. In reading the guidebook and the Thru-Hikers' Companion, I had somehow missed the information that this was an undeveloped state park, with absolutely nothing at the end of this section except a little homemade sign indicating that a side trail led two miles to Lickdale. Well, there would be a pay phone in Lickdale. So I walked the two miles into town and looked around, finally finding a pay phone at the local volunteer fire station. But I could not reach the person I'd hoped to reach. All right, time to think of Plan B.

I inquired at the local campground whether anyone might be available locally to shuttle me back to the trailhead near Duncannon. A lot of campgrounds serve Appalachian Trail hikers, and there was a good chance that they'd have somebody on the premises who provided this service. My difficulty was that I hadn't brought along my pack and my tent, and thus was not equipped to camp overnight. The folks there had no clue, but someone remembered that there was a Yellow Cab over in Lebanon. With the assistance of the telephone directory, I got through to Yellow Cab and arranged the needed road trip. It took about an hour to drive the distance, so I was more than happy to pay the \$65 fare. Had I found a private shuttle driver, the fee would probably have been about the same.

Needless to say, when I arrived back at my vehicle after dark, I immediately drove back to Clarks Ferry and spent a second night in my tent at the campsite. I wasn't about to go anywhere else after that day's adventure.

Why did I not lug the pack and tent? Because I could hike twice the miles in a day by traveling light, and I did this numerous times. I could usually carry the 25-pound overnight pack eight or nine miles a day without wearing myself out. "Slackpacking" with a day pack, or just a water bottle and lunch, I could do fourteen or sixteen miles a day if the terrain wasn't too difficult.

Basically, blue blazing is about having options. I can change the game plan anytime I choose. I don't have to keep walking in the same straight line. If I feel like doing a longer section, I can skip ahead and do that, then come back to do the easier section on a day when conditions aren't favorable for a longer hike. I can spend an extra night out if I need to do so, without upsetting anyone else's schedule. I can drive into town at the end of my hike and resupply and rest.

In Vermont and New Hampshire, in 2005, I walked some interesting loop hikes, which thru-hikers never get to do. After other experiences on the Trail in New Hampshire, I decided I didn't want to go over Kinsman Mountain. However, I could get in a few miles out of Franconia Notch up to Lonesome Lake and back, using the blue-blazed Basin Cascades Trail as one leg of a loop. I believe that two-mile Basin Cascades Trail must be the most beautiful two miles of trail I've ever hiked. There is a whole series

of beautiful waterfalls and cascades. As I hiked up toward the junction with the AT, I was continually amazed by the scenery, and the trail was nice.

Let's overlook the fact that I got lost somewhere in the middle. The trail crossed the stream, and I failed to do so. The map incorrectly showed the trail following the right bank all the way up. Bushwhacking for awhile on the wrong side, I continued to follow the stream, knowing that I'd get to the junction with the AT anyway if I just kept on. After a little while I went to take yet another picture of yet another cascade, and spotted hikers on the other side. Brainstorm! Maybe that's where the trail went! So I made my way across and rejoined the trail for an easy walk the rest of the way.

When I reached the AT, I found myself stumbling along over rough boulders again, leaving the nice Basin Cascades Trail and climbing to Lonesome Lake. I walked the loop trail around the lake, took a couple of pictures, and returned to the Franconia Notch trailhead parking lot by way of the AT, all rocks and roots. Along the way I picked up a thru-hiker, Kokomo, who was looking for a ride into town. I was happy to oblige.

On the Basin Cascades Trail there is a lovely little waterfall not a tenth of a mile off the Appalachian Trail, yet I'd bet that few thru-hikers divert that one-tenth of a mile to see Rocky Glen Falls, or any of the other beautiful spots on the Basin Cascades Trail. They're too focused on making a maximum number of miles on the AT that day. By contrast, I would much rather have had that wonderful day following the stream than rock-hopping straight up and down the AT.

Down in Vermont I improvised on a section hike out of Danby-Landgrove Road to the Peru Peak Shelter. After a steep, scary descent of Baker Peak, I walked across what must be the world's longest bog bridge before reaching the shelter the other side of Griffith Lake. Did I want to go back the same way? On the map there was an intersection with something called the Old Job Trail, which looked to be about the same length as the AT section I'd just hiked. It left the AT near the lake, and then rejoined it after six miles or so. Why not follow the blue blazes and bypass the climb of Baker Peak on the return trip? The elevations shown on the map for the Old Job Trail looked pretty uniform, no big climbs or descents. Besides, I would get to view the site of the world's largest sawdust pile, a remnant of the sawmill that used to stand on the site.

Well, maybe it's not the world's largest, but it's so big I couldn't fit it all into one frame of a photograph.

I hadn't planned it that way when I left the trailhead at Danby-Landgrove Road, but I was free to choose a different return route. The Old Job Trail was really easy walking, all old roadbed. Ever so often I'd come to a wooden bridge across a stream. There were signs that said "Snowmobiles Only," but nobody was looking, so I walked across them anyway. This side trail was actually a tenth of a mile shorter than that stretch of the AT, and nicer walking, with some old apple orchards that had ripe fruit.

I didn't plan that alternate route six months in advance. I didn't even plan it 24 hours in advance. Yet I was free to do it, and had everything I needed for the trip.

On my traverse of Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness in 2002, I wore myself out with my initial four-day backpacking trip. When I came out of the woods, I took a day off to visit Acadia National Park and rest a bit. Did I want to plunge back into the 100-Mile Wilderness and do one of the 30-mile segments? The answer was no. I opted for a day hike over Pleasant Pond Mountain out of Caratunk, Maine instead. At the end of the day I was very tired again, and had received a few blackfly bites. I wasn't eager to do more of the Wilderness. Instead, I drove over the next day and hiked the Gulf Hagas Loop. This is a beautiful loop trail that intersects the AT in the southern part of the Wilderness. Although it is possible to detour and hike the loop on the way through the Wilderness, I suspected that when I hiked the AT through there, I wouldn't have the time or the energy to do so.

Of all the detours I could have taken on the Trail, the Gulf Hagas Loop proved to be one of the nicest. Yet most thru-hikers, when they finally get to the 100-Mile Wilderness, are so eager to push on to Mt. Katahdin, or have so little time left, that they walk right by and never see these beautiful waterfalls. I think it's a shame. And I missed nothing, because I came back the next year and hiked the rest of the Wilderness at a better time of year.

It's all about being flexible. In October 2005, I day hiked a section of the AT from Dalton to Cheshire, Massachusetts, a distance of some 7 trail miles. I got started from the trailhead in Dalton around 10:30am, headed over the mountain, and reached Cheshire around 3:30. Hmm. If I hiked back the same way, and covered the distance in another five hours, I'd be hiking nearly two hours after dark to return to the Dalton trailhead. I didn't like the idea of hiking after dark on a fairly rough trail. What to do?

My trail map showed a bicycle trail running back toward Dalton from Cheshire. This easy, paved trail might be a mile longer, but it didn't go over the mountain. The elevation profile had to be almost flat. Instead of making a little over one mile an hour, I could kick into high gear and walk three miles an hour on the flat pavement. That would get me back to the trailhead at Dalton before dark. So I opted to make a couple of turns and get onto the bicycle trail. Sure enough, I got back to the truck at 6:30, right around sunset, instead of being out till 8:30. I'd already covered the section of AT, and really didn't need to walk it twice.

I couldn't talk about shuttles without mentioning the Appalachian Mountain Club shuttle buses which serve the Trail in New Hampshire. For the convenience of section hikers as well as thru-hikers, the Appalachian Mountain Club runs a regular route with buses to pick up and drop off hikers at various trailheads in the region, for a nominal fee. This inexpensive shuttle service allowed me to do a couple of sections of the Trail which I

wouldn't have contemplated otherwise. Base of operations is the Highland Center, near Mt. Washington.

When I dropped in at the Center to inquire about shuttle routes and possible pickup/drop-off points, I got information about the service from a young man at the desk. I wondered if the driver would possibly go a couple of miles out of his way to deposit me at a closer trailhead. A passing staff member assured me that the bus would never go out of its way for anyone, and I'd just have to walk the extra mile or two.

In practice, however, the shuttle drivers proved to be very accommodating. On my first trip, I parked at the Webster Cliffs trailhead on Highway 302 and waited for the bus early in the morning. "What I want to do," I explained to the driver, "is to start my hike at the Zealand trailhead, and hike back toward this point, where I have my vehicle parked."

"Good golly," the driver said, "I don't get around to that point in my route for another three hours."

Which I already knew, having studied the map and the bus schedule. "Yeah, I realize that," I said.

The driver looked around. "Tell you what, I don't have any other passengers right now and I won't be holding anybody up. Why don't I just back up and take you the couple of miles to the Zealand trailhead right now, instead of you riding the bus for three hours."

He went out of his way to drive up that remote access road, and deposited me within 100 yards of the Zealand trailhead early in the morning. As a result, I had more time to hike that day and really enjoyed the trip. The section between Zealand Falls and Highway 302 is, in my opinion, possibly the most beautiful stretch of Trail in all of New Hampshire. I went up to the Zealand Falls hut and hung out for a little while, then took some pictures at the falls. On the way down, I met volunteer trail crew members and complimented them on their efforts. I took the side trip to Thoreau Falls and spent some time working my way down off trail to photograph the falls there.

All in all, because of having three extra hours to spend, I had a thoroughly enjoyable day on the Trail, without being pressured timewise.

The next day, I waited for the bus at the same trailhead early in the morning. "I'm wanting to start hiking at the Highland Center, and take Crawford Path Trail up to the AT," I said, "upon which I'll hike the AT back down to my truck at the Webster Cliffs trailhead." The Webster Cliffs trailhead is only a mile or two from Highland Center, mind you, but I didn't want to hike that extra mile at the end of a strenuous day. The wisdom of this was proved some hours later.

"Why, I don't get back to the Highland Center for another three hours," the driver responded. "Let me just back up and take you to the Highland Center right now, so you can start earlier."

He didn't even want to charge me for the trip, but of course I gratefully paid the fare. I was to cherish that extra time a few hours later.

As it happened, rain was forecast for later in the day. Only it came much sooner, when I was halfway up Crawford Path toward the AT. I had hoped to be off the Trail by the time precipitation started, but such was not the case. This was at the end of August, in case you're wondering.

By the time I reached the AT, a ferocious wind was blowing sleet (yes, you read it right, SLEET!) I headed down toward Webster Cliffs in a cold, windy environment. By the time I reached Mizpah Hut, it was noon and I was cold and wet. So I went on inside the hut and opted for a hot bowl of what they laughingly called beef and vegetable soup. It consisted of a thin, fishy-tasting broth with a handful of black beans and carrot chunks floating therein. Know what? It was liquid, it was hot, and it was only a dollar. So I dunked my cheese crackers therein, consumed, and rested for awhile, hoping to dry out a bit. In the process, I overheard a conversation between two hikers concerning my state of residence.

"Pardon me," I said, "but are you from Tennessee?"

"Yeah," one of the guys said. "From Johnson City."

"I'm Louisiana Lou, from Knoxville, from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club."

"Oh, really. Do you know Jenny Whited?"

And of course Jenny was one of my best hiking friends, who walked maybe 1000-2000 miles with me in the Smokies, and showed up for my son Andy's Eagle Scout ceremony, because she had hiked so many of those miles with him also. It was a rare moment. I mean, 1000 miles from home, in the middle of nowhere, do you expect to encounter somebody who knows one of your best friends?

Anyway, I went back out into the cold, somewhat wet environment and continued my day hike. At the edge of the clearing there was a sign saying "Mt. Clinton Trail – 6.1 miles to Hwy. 302." The Appalachian Trail is called by many names in this region, none of them AT, so I just assumed this was where I wanted to go. The 6.1 miles sounded right. Since I'd left my map in the shuttle bus, I couldn't check it to be absolutely sure.

When I arrived at the next trail junction, almost half an hour later, warning bells went off in my head. The trail ahead didn't look like the Appalachian Trail, nor did I see any white blazes. Hmm!

Having no real clue which way to go, I hiked back up to the lodge, where I could ask directions. As I approached the lodge, I spied white blazes uphill, where I'd come down earlier. I also saw more white blazes going off into the woods. In other words, the Trail did not cross the clearing at all. It followed about two steps into the clearing and immediately turned back into the woods without coming anywhere near the lodge. All right, I'd lost 45 precious minutes, but now I was back on track. Unfortunately, the Trail

climbs roughly and steeply over the summit called Mt. Webster, with much scrambling over rock faces. The route proved to be every bit as difficult as my adventure on Mahoosuc Arm a couple of weeks before. I came out upon Webster Cliffs around 4:30, faced with a steep plunge down the exposed cliff. Mercifully, by this time it was very foggy and I couldn't see over the edge. Had I been able to see the sheer drop, I very possibly would not have been able to continue – and I had to cover 3.1 miles to get down to my truck.

At one point I slipped, and both feet went out from under me. I landed on both knees, painfully, and slid a bit – but not over the edge. I pondered once again the question of why I could safely climb up and down 499 slick rock faces, and the 500th would trip me.

Around 7pm the Trail finally became more walkable, leaving behind the rock climbs. I figured, in 2-1/2 hours of hiking, I must have covered a couple of miles since that sign at the top of Webster Cliffs. When the sun set, around 7:30, I seemed to be making time, and figured I had to be on the last half mile of the journey. I still didn't see the Saco River, which the Trail crosses one-tenth of a mile from the road. Then I came to a sign that said "2 miles Hwy 302."

I couldn't believe it. Had I spent three hours doing one mile? It didn't seem right. So I got out the flashlight and scanned the sign. Sure enough, it said "1 mile Saco River Trail, 2 miles Hwy 302." I saw no decimal points. My feet had been wet for over seven hours, but I was warm enough. I had food and water left. Uttering some choice epithets, I slogged on, using the flashlight intermittently. I would simply endure until I got to the road, no question about it.

After a few minutes I reached a trail junction with a sign that said "Saco River Trail," and "Webster Cliff Trail, 1 mile Hwy 302." Hey, one mile sounded a lot better than two.

After another five minutes or less, I reached the bridge across the Saco River, and on the other side of the bridge was the highway. Obviously the sign was meant to say .2 and .1, but I swear there were no decimal points, and this fact caused me much needless consternation. I was at the highway by 8:45.

Need I add that I was really grateful for not having to hike another mile up the road in the dark to get to my truck!

Thank you, shuttle drivers of the AMC.

CHAPTER 4: CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT

I've certainly not always done things the smart way. When I first started backpacking in the Smokies, back in October 1993, any real backpacker would have died laughing at my gear. My son Andy (then 12 years old) wanted to do an overnight camping trip, so I just assembled what gear we had and started out on a simple 13-mile loop hike over Shuckstack Mountain. I had a much-too-bulky, much-too-heavy Coleman sleeping bag attached to my military surplus backpack with bungee cords. Yes, bungee cords – so you understand how ignorant we both were. Embarrassingly, we met a former president of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club on the trail. He must have struggled to keep a straight face as we exchanged pleasantries.

After that expedition I understood a few – very few – things about backpacking. First, it is imperative to have a pack that fits. Guess what! My \$50 military surplus pack was no bargain at all. It was made for a male 6 feet tall, and on my very female 5'4" body it was a disaster. I had deep bruises on my hips for days afterward. Lesson number one.

Andy was carrying a Boy Scout rucksack that I'd purchased at the flea market for \$5. It held his sleeping bag and not much more. Moreover, if we were to do any real backpacking, maybe we should have real backpacker sleeping bags and inflatable sleeping pads. Lesson number two.

For our next overnight expedition, I purchased a Coleman Peak One external frame pack with adjustable lash tabs. I could carry this pack, with a smaller frame, much more comfortably. I also purchased a decent sleeping bag, lightweight but supposedly good for temperatures down to 10 degrees. I figured if the nights got any colder than that, I didn't need to be out there anyway. Over the next year, after a few more overnight trips, I purchased a larger Peak One pack for Andy's larger (and growing) frame, which held all the supplies he needed and was comfortable for him to carry.

Although we cooked over a campfire, I knew eventually we would have to have a camp stove. There are many places where open fires are prohibited, for various reasons, so the camp stove is an essential for backpacking. I never liked the idea of lugging a propane stove, with the attendant fuel cylinders and such. We first tried a Sierra stove, which burned leaves, twigs, or anything else combustible, but required two AA batteries to run a small motor. I gave up on it in disgust after a camping trip on the Florida Trail when I had extreme difficulty getting a fire going with damp materials. Finally I bought an inexpensive Esbit stove, which used solid fuel tablets. One tablet would boil a quart or so of water in a reasonable time, and the simple apparatus would fold up to the size and weight of a pack of cigarettes. I've stuck with the Esbit ever since, tucking away a few of the tablets in whatever handy space I have in the pack. I know to carry matches in a

moisture-proof Zip-loc bag, and if I can just light a match, I can get the tablet burning. If I run out of fuel tablets, I can use firestarter sticks in a pinch, and I always carry a few of those. I never know when I'll want to burn some trash. The only drawback of the Esbit stove is that outdoor stores generally won't stock the fuel tablets, although I found an outfitter in Gorham, New Hampshire that did sell them. No problem: since I carry supplies in my truck, I can haul any amount of the tablets in my supply box, and reload the pack for each overnight excursion.

At one point in time, Andy and I had Ergomat inflatable sleeping mats, with three separate inflatable compartments that we could adjust to our needs. I've since acquired a couple of Thermarest inflatable mattresses, and I carry one on all backpacking trips. The second one stays inflated in the truck in my sleeping space. However, it is sometimes necessary to improvise.

On one overnight trip in the Smokies, Andy and I got to the trailhead and unloaded the packs. "Oops!" he said. "I'm afraid I forgot my sleeping bag."

Temperatures overnight promised to be down in to the 30's. "Gee, that's too bad, Andy," I replied. "Here's a blanket and a 55-gallon trash bag. Stuff them into your pack and let's go."

When we reached the campsite, it was Andy's job to set up the tent, mine to see to the campfire and cooking. He got the tent up, whereupon I said, "Let me have my inflatable sleeping mat, so I can get my sleeping space laid out."

I had seen him pack my sleeping mat into his pack in the living room at home, so I knew we were okay on that score. Andy dug into his pack, rummaged around again, and finally came up with, "Uh, Mom, I think it fell out."

Sigh.

"All right, Andy, here's my other 55-gallon trash bag. Go fill it just as full of dry leaves as you can, and I'll sleep on a leaf mattress."

But Andy really was a good Boy Scout. He gave me his Ergomat and slept on the leaf mattress himself. I gave him my space blanket to wrap up in, which kept him warm enough to be fairly comfortable overnight. Actually, a few years later, when I was backpacking to Hump Mountain on the Appalachian Trail over a hundred miles north of the Smokies, I arrived at the trailhead after a three-hour drive to start my hike. That's when I discovered I had neglected to attach my sleeping pad to the overnight pack. Fortunately, I had those 55-gallon trash bags, without which no hiker should ever leave the trailhead. So I pulled a small pillow from the truck, threw it in the pack, and started out. At my campsite on Little Hump Mountain, I found enough dry leaves to fill the trash bag, and made a bed for myself inside the tent. Do you know, a leaf mattress is really pretty comfortable?

A word about trash bags. There is no more indispensable piece of equipment that a

hiker could ever carry. If I learned nothing else from hiking in the Smokies, I trained myself to keep those trashbags in the pack. They weigh almost nothing, yet lend themselves to half a dozen essential uses. On a trail maintenance expedition one August, we had a 20-mile day hike, with violent thunderstorms attacking us at 4pm or so. I was working and hiking along with friend George Gorker, who had somehow not brought a rain poncho. Since temperatures were dipping into the 50's, and we were 10 miles from the nearest road, I didn't think it was safe for either of us to get thoroughly soaked. So I took out my trusty 55-gallon trash bag, cut a couple of holes in it, and had George put it over his torso for a raincoat. He had a cap that kept the rain off his face. Although the storm was severe, it didn't last, so we both stayed fairly dry and avoided hypothermia as we walked the last ten miles down off the mountain.

I carried a trash bag in my day pack for seven years or so before I finally needed it. But like the first aid kit, I routinely carried it because I never knew when the need might arise. Finally, in May 2001, I found myself hiking a section of the Appalachian Trail just north of Roanoke, Virginia. Light precipitation began, so I pulled what I thought was my rain jacket out of the day pack. Guess what! It was rain pants instead. So I cut a couple of holes in the 55-gallon trash bag, put it over my torso, and kept on going. I was a few miles from the trailhead when this occurred, so I couldn't just dash back to the truck in any case. Since the rain never was heavy, I stayed dry enough to be comfortable, and avoided hypothermia.

But that's not all there is to know about trash bags. At some point in time, I realized that it was extremely difficult to start a fire in the morning with dew all over the leaves and twigs I would have to use. I won't tell you how many years it took me to figure this out, but -- why not stuff a little bundle of dry leaves and twigs inside a trash bag overnight, so they'd stay dry?

New Year's Day, 2002, I awoke in my tent at a campsite in Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area. The temperature was around 10 degrees, and light snow flurries were in the air. I needed to start a fire and warm myself for the day's activities, which included packing out to the Sunset Overlook trailhead, then driving down to the Leatherwood Ford trailhead to meet my fellow hikers from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club for a six-mile New Year's Day hike. Let me tell you, that morning campfire made everything else bearable. I cooked breakfast, warmed my hands, puttered around and took my time breaking down the tent. Every time the intense cold started to get to me, I could go warm myself at the fire again. And the trash bag made the fire possible.

In our early days of backpacking, Andy and I did not have pack covers. Therefore, when we found ourselves backpacking in the rain in spite of all good intentions, we needed to protect our gear from the precipitation. We would haul out the 55-gallon trash bags, cut a lengthwise slit, and place them over our packs to keep out the moisture.

Spending the night in shelters in New England, I was out on some cool nights, to say the least. I learned that placing a trash bag beneath my sleeping mat insulated me from icy breezes coming from below. In short, I have had reason to be grateful for the protective quality of plastic trash bags many times.

The other thing I always carry is a length of yellow polypropylene rope. I've seen backpackers carrying coils of heavy hemp rope, and I don't know why they do it. For a couple of bucks at any hardware store, I can purchase a 50-foot length of yellow rope that weighs about six ounces, and is very strong. I've used it to tie up fallen trail signs, have given a length to a fellow hiker who had a broken pack strap, and on and on. One time when Andy and I and one of his friends were hiking Mt. Leconte in the Smokies, Andy started to lose a sole off one boot just as we started down from the summit. I tied up his boot with yellow rope, and he kept on walking. As a matter of fact, he beat me down to the parking lot.

On a backpacking expedition on Max Patch Mountain in North Carolina, Andy's friend lost the button off his pants just as we started up the trail. I cut off a piece of yellow rope and gave it to him improvise a belt.

Cutting blackberry briars with a swing-blade weeder in the Smokies, more than once a crew member lost a bolt off the frame that held the weeder blade. Naturally, when a bolt worked its way loose and popped off into the bushes, it was impossible to find, and there was the weeder blade, hanging by one end. We were able to thread a piece of yellow rope through the bolt hole, tie up the blade, and keep on weeding.

When we were in Colorado Springs, Andy had his first car, a Honda Civic hatchback. Unbeknownst to us, the muffler and tailpipe were in danger of falling off. A cop stopped us on our way home from the flea market and informed us that he had observed this imminent catastrophe, and we needed to do something about it right away. Another job for yellow rope! No, of course that wasn't a permanent repair, but it kept things together until we could get the car to a muffler shop.

When we were backpacking with frame packs, I used lengths of yellow rope and a simple knot to attach my sleeping pad and the tent to the pack frame. It was easy and convenient.

My three sons are convinced to this day that Mom can fix anything with yellow rope and duct tape.

TENTS: When Andy and I first backpacked, we had a \$29.95 Wal-Mart dome tent. We later progressed to a two-person Sierra Designs Clip Flashlight, which weighed a little over four pounds all told. When I began solo backpacking, I found a freestanding Eureka Zephyr one-person tent for under \$100 that weighed right at three pounds, rain fly, stuff sack and all. Thus I cut a pound off my pack, and on my very first trip with the new tent was grateful that it was freestanding. I camped pretty much right on top of a

rock formation, where there was no soil to drive in tent pegs.

A ground cloth is a must. A simple piece of stiff plastic will do, but more elaborate ground cloths are available. Interestingly, some people who stayed with me at a shelter in Vermont in 2005 were using lengths of Tyvek house wrap, which is very lightweight, durable, and rolls up really small in the pack.

PACKS, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FRAME: Andy and I backpacked for a few years with external frame packs. Mine had about a 2500 cubic inch capacity. When I finally decided to try an internal frame, I shopped the outdoor stores. I found that I could purchase an internal frame pack for about \$300 that weighed an extra pound and would stow 3500 cubic inches of stuff. But wait! The new pack would have to contain the sleeping bag, which I had heretofore stuffed into a stuff sack and strapped to the frame. Very likely that sleeping bag would take up all 1000 extra cubic inches of capacity, so would I be gaining anything other than an extra pound of weight to carry? I vowed to think it over a bit more. Finally I found a fairly cheap (under \$100) internal frame pack that weighed about the same as my external frame pack, but had a capacity of 4200 cubic inches.

After my first overnight trip with the new pack, I knew I'd never go back to my old external frame pack again. It molded to my body better, and swayed less as I walked, tiring me less. I couldn't quite stuff my below-zero sleeping into the skimpy sleeping bag compartment and zip it up, but then I finally thought, why would I have to zip it up anyway? There are compression straps that hold the bag in, zipped in or not. There's no reason to worry about getting the bag soaked, since I have a waterproof pack cover. After a couple of years I finally got the shoulder straps adjusted to fit, too.

When I finally bought a pack cover, I was immediately grateful for that. Tent camping, I found that if it rained overnight, that pack cover kept all my gear dry. When I had to hike in the rain, likewise, it kept the moisture off everything in my pack.

BOOTS: When I started hiking in the Smokies, in October 1989, I owned a pair of street sneakers and a pair of black suede zip-up boots with low heels. I tried both on the trail, and found my feet kept slipping on wet rocks in the sneakers. The suede boots were better, but did not provide sufficient ankle support. So I went to a discount store and purchased a \$20 pair of hiking boots. After many blisters, they were more or less broken in. But I finally learned that if I wanted to do longer hikes, and avoid blisters, I needed to be able to wear two pairs of socks, ideally a polypropylene liner sock inside a heavy wool sock. I needed a larger size boot for that.

Next I hiked for a few years in L.L. Bean rubberized boots, which were waterproof and good for stream crossings that didn't exceed nine inches in depth. However, after a couple of thousand miles of hiking, my feet apparently grew a bit in size. I went from size 7 to size 8-1/2 overnight when I went to the shoe store and got fitted for a pair of Hi-Tec

light hiking boots. My feet were much happier, and I stopped worrying about blisters.

My advice to other hikers is generally, get a pair of real hiking boots, and real hiking socks. If the boots aren't comfortable, keep looking till you find a pair that really fit. You will probably need a larger size than your regular shoe size. The most common cause of blisters is a pair of too-small boots. In my case, I finally found I needed a wide width, which many manufacturers don't make. Probably the most comfortable boots I ever had were the Rockports I wore out on my New England AT expedition in 2005.

OUTERWEAR: I've never worn a coat or parka on the Trail, because I like maximum freedom of movement. For winter hiking and backpacking, I've always used an insulated vest, underneath which I can layer a couple of turtlenecks and/or my wool shirt. I picked up the wool shirt for 50c at a yard sale eighteen years ago. If the weather is really cold and breezy, I'll don my fleece pants and a knit wool cap. I seem to stay warm enough that way. If the temperature is below 10 degrees, I really don't need to be out there anyway.

RAINGEAR: Nothing really keeps you dry in a downpour. I spent the night at Goddard Shelter in Vermont in September 2005 with seven other people. It had rained for two solid days, and everybody was dripping wet. Since the rain was blowing horizontally right into the shelter, I was grateful that a couple of my shelter mates were able to rig a sheet and a tarp over the front to keep the moisture off us. Everybody hung up wet clothing, but there was no way for it to dry overnight. So they put the wet clothes back on for the next day's hike, saving their dry clothes for the following night. As I had learned a few weeks earlier, it's miserable, even dangerous, to spend the night in wet clothes.

My \$3 poncho keeps me about as dry as anything. The lower legs will eventually get wet and spill moisture down into the boots, if the rain is persistent enough. But that's why I carry an extra pair of dry socks. I've tried rain suits, and after fifteen minutes or so, I start getting wet anyway. Maybe a \$300 Gore-Tex suit would be better, but hikers have told me that a person still gets wet after awhile even in an expensive suit. I bought an inexpensive Stearns rain jacket and tried that out on my backpacking trip in Maine in August 2005. Yes, it was waterproof. Also, after ten minutes rivers of sweat were running down my arms. If I was going to get wet from the inside, why worry about the outside?

GLOVES: I hate wearing insulated gloves. My fingers are too clumsy to hold or pick up things, and usually the gloves keep my hands too warm, so that they sweat. Yet when the temperatures are down into the 30s and below, there's little choice. The lightweight knit gloves that I always keep tucked into my insulated vest won't keep my hands warm below 40 degrees. Insulated, waterproof gloves or mittens are a must.

HEADGEAR: My preference is a visored cap, to keep stuff out of my hair and the sun off my face. Since I have virtually no pigment in my skin, I never really tan. I can get a sunburn in five minutes flat, standing or walking in an exposed area. I can tuck a

bandanna into the back of the cap and have it handy for any use, any time. I've found when I try to carry the bandanna anywhere else, I invariably lose it.

In winter I have a cloth cap with earflaps (military surplus) and also a knit cap. Which I wear depends on whether the cold is accompanied by wind.

EATING UTENSILS: I decided a long time ago that I was not going to do dishes in camp, period. Instead of dirtying my cooking pot and having to clean it, I eat only dehydrated foods that can be reconstituted with hot water. I use the very small cooking pot to heat water, then pour the hot water into my instant mashed potatoes, my freeze-dried dinner, or whatever. I eat all my meals in paper bowls. I carry plastic spoons and forks. These things are very lightweight and can be burned when I'm done. To my way of thinking, it's more sanitary as well, since I never reuse a dish that has previously contained food, and there is no food residue in the cooking pot.

We all learn as we go, about equipment and everything else on the trail.

CHAPTER 5: LOST AND FOUND

In June 2002 I drove up to Maine to hike the upper 40 miles of the 100-Mile Wilderness on the Appalachian Trail. The previous year, hiking in Virginia, I had given a shuttle ride to a thru-hiker from Maine. His advice to me about the Trail in Maine was, if you can't do all 287 miles of Maine, then you should really do the 100-Mile Wilderness.

Having now done most of the Trail in Maine, I'm not sure I agree. I'd probably pick the Saddleback Range instead. Anyway, I pored over the maps and figured out how I could do the 100-Mile Wilderness in three backpacking trips. The fact is, people commonly day hike it, since there are numerous logging roads that intersect the Trail at crucial points. Locals who know the logging roads do day hikes all the time. The difficulty is that you must know the roads, and it's not that easy to figure things out from the map. There is trailhead parking at certain spots if you know where they are. For instance, one of my friends from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club claimed she had section hiked the entire AT without ever backpacking. I do know that I met day hikers at Chairback Pond, and I had a conversation with a day hiker around Gulf Hagas Mountain who told me he had hiked the entire Trail on day hikes. "I tried thru-hiking from Georgia," he told me, "and I figured out after less than 100 miles that my body isn't meant to carry the big pack. I've since hiked the whole Trail in segments of day hikes." He had the support of his wife, who did the driving to drop him off and pick him up at the end of sections.

When I stayed for a couple of days with the Pie Lady in Monson, Maine, she drove a car shuttle for one of the hikers and picked him up at some point in the 100-Mile Wilderness about 14 miles up the Trail.

The trouble with this is that there's a lot of driving involved, and it's really advisable to have somebody to pick you up and drop you off. For example, to reach the Trail crossing at Jo-Mary Road in the Wilderness, it's necessary to drive an hour and a half from Monson, or longer than that from Millinocket. Rather than do a long series of expensive shuttles, I figured it would make more sense for me to park at Abol Bridge and hire a ride from Millinocket down to Jo-Mary Road to start my traverse of the upper 40 miles, which I should be able to cover in four days. As for the lower part, there's an access point at the crossing of the West Branch of the Pleasant River. That 58.5-mile stretch of the Trail can be broken up into two segments of approximately 30 miles each. If I could park at the West Branch and get a ride up to Jo-Mary Road, I could hike down to my truck in three days or so. Then if I could get a shuttle from Monson, I could hike back to my truck from Monson, or vice versa, in another three days.

I swear, I planned my assault on the 100-Mile Wilderness all spring before driving up to Maine in June. I should have had it all memorized. There was one four-day

backpacking trip, and two three-day trips. I had packed the food I needed plus a little extra for emergencies. I had all the maps and the guidebook. Yet, when I set out to hike the upper section from Jo-Mary Road to Abol Bridge, with a shuttle from Minuteman Taxi out of Millinocket, I somehow thought this was one of the 30-mile segments. Therefore, I packed three days of food plus a little, and set off into the woods with what I thought were the right maps. Starting my first day's hike at 7:30am, I made good time and arrived at Nahmakanta Stream Campsite by 4pm, with lots of time to set up the tent, cook a meal, and rest inside the tent, safe from insects. Little did I suspect the adventures the next day would bring.

The next morning I awoke to a somewhat wet environment. Intermittent rain had started during the night, so I knew I'd have to pack up a wet tent before journeying on. That's just something a backpacker has to deal with from time to time, and it didn't particularly worry me. But the real trouble started shortly after breakfast, when I retreated into the woods to brush my teeth. Backpackers are advised not to do so in a shelter or campsite, for fear of attracting wildlife. So I retreated a ways from my tent to perform this basic function. When I'd finished, I looked around and started back toward my tent. Wait! I couldn't actually see the tent. I took a few more steps, then wondered if I might be moving in the wrong direction. So I stopped immediately to assess the situation.

I couldn't have been more than a few steps away from the campsite, but I literally could not see my tent in any direction. In other words, there I was, 1000 miles from home, in the middle of the 100-Mile Wilderness, and lost. There was nobody else at the campsite, so I couldn't just yell and ask somebody to yell back.

Since it would be disastrous to go any farther in an uncertain direction, I used common sense. Because Nahmakanta Stream is a pretty big flowing stream, I could not fail to reach it if I followed the sound of the water. The Trail ran between me and the stream; therefore, I would intersect the Trail if I headed toward the stream. I did exactly that, and came out on the Trail within a couple of minutes. Unfortunately, I still couldn't see the campsite and my tent.

I thought I must have come out to the southbound side of the campsite, so I figured to hike north for five minutes. When I didn't come to the campsite in five minutes, I reversed direction and allowed ten minutes to hike back south, thus covering all possibilities. Sure enough, I finally came to the campsite, packed up my wet tent, and got going on my day's journey about 9am.

But the day's misadventures were just beginning. As I set out for my second day's hike, I discovered I did not have the map I needed for the next few miles of my trip, but had inexplicably packed Map #2 and #3 instead of Map #1 and #2. Darn! When I pulled into the Wadleigh Stream Lean-to at 2pm, I met some southbound thru-hikers with the right maps. Imagine my surprise when I consulted those maps and learned I was on a 40-

mile segment instead of one of the shorter 30-milers. Abol Bridge wasn't 12 miles away; it was more like 23.

It had rained pretty much all day and I was not very dry. Since the hikers at the shelter had a fire going, and since I now realized it was about eight miles to the next shelter, I opted to spend the night right there, and dry everything by the fire. I doubted very seriously that I could cover eight more miles before dark in the rain. Considering the food situation, I decided to consume only soup and a few nuts and cheese crackers, so as to leave my nice freeze-dried dinner for the next night.

Since I hadn't packed enough food, I simply had to cover a lot of miles that third day, so as to be within striking distance of Abol Bridge the fourth day. I couldn't stop at Rainbow Stream Lean-to, but had to continue a few more miles to the Rainbow Stream Campsite for the night. If I hiked 12 miles that day, I'd have a manageable 11 miles left to do the fourth day. Because the elevation profile wasn't very rugged, I figured I could do it. I started walking at 7am, covering the two miles or so to the summit of Nesuntabunt Mountain by 9:45. This wasn't fast progress, but Nesuntabunt was the steepest climb of the day, and I was glad to have it behind me. I had gotten lost a time or two on the ascent of Nesuntabunt, due to the fact that the Trail changes direction a couple of times without the customary double-blaze warning. I'd be going along, and suddenly the Trail would disappear. So I had to backtrack to pick it up again.

Anyway, I decided to take a break at the summit and go out to the overlook and take a picture. I also consumed one of my few remaining packages of cheese crackers as a mid-morning snack. Then I returned to the Trail about 10am and headed down. After I'd gone maybe a third of a mile, I reached a distinctive stream crossing with log rounds for stepping stones. Gosh, that looked familiar. I'd crossed just such a stream on the way up the mountain. Did they have a crossing like that on both sides of the mountain? What are the odds? So I turned around, started back up, and sure enough, there were familiar terrain features. I had covered this ground before, and if I didn't hurry up and get over the summit a second time, I would have a hard time making it to my campsite for the night.

At the summit I continued in the correct, northbound direction, and reached the Rainbow Stream Lean-to around 4pm. But I couldn't stop there, remember; I had to make it to the Rainbow Stream Campsite before dark. I figured at a rate of one mile per hour, I could get there by 8pm, about the time it would get dark. Tired from my day thus far, I did something I sometimes do when confronted by fatigue and the necessity to do more miles before quitting for the day. I took one ephedra tablet. It's a mild stimulant, and harmless when taken in small doses of one or two tablets. As of this writing, the FDA is banning it from over-the-counter sale because some very stupid people have taken about 10 or 20 tablets at a time and died from it. (They could die from a similar dose of Tylenol;

in fact, I personally knew a teenager who committed suicide with Tylenol. But ephedra is being banned, and Tylenol isn't. Go figure.)

With just a little energy boost, I kept hiking on this fairly easy terrain. I didn't need anything more than just the strength to keep walking and not stop every 50 yards to rest. I must have walked 500 bog bridges over swampland that day. Sometime around 5pm, I slipped on one and fell face first into the muck. I wasn't hurt, but I vowed that no matter how tired I found myself at the end of the day, I absolutely would take a sponge bath and change into my one clean set of clothes for the final day's hike.

At my rate of progress, I figured it would take at least three or four more hours to reach the Rainbow Spring Campsite. Thus I did not start looking for it until 7pm or so. I had passed a little sign that said "Rainbow Spring," but at that point it was only 6:30. The sign didn't say "Rainbow Spring Campsite," just "Rainbow Spring." So I hustled on, and started questioning at 7pm how much farther it might be to the campsite. At nearly 8pm I was exhausted and knew I must camp illegally for the night at the first opportunity. Obviously I had passed the campsite, but there was no way I would reverse direction and walk a mile or more back to spend the night there. If I was farther along the Trail, and would have less miles to hike that fourth day, so much the better.

Right at the end of Rainbow Lake, I found a spot that looked level enough, and set up my tent a little ways off the Trail. I was close to the north end of the lake, and could get water conveniently. When I cooked up that long-anticipated freeze-dried meal for supper, it tasted like garbage and I couldn't eat more than a few bites. I was too tired to eat anyway. I was too tired to go to sleep right away. I listened to cry of the loons over the lake and hoped the following day's hike wouldn't be too hard.

I started walking at 7am after consuming the last two packets of cheese grits for breakfast. Around 8:15 I reached the Rainbow Ledges, where a sign proclaimed that I had only six miles to go to Abol Bridge. So instead of hiking 11 miles that final day, I was doing only about eight, and I got to Abol Bridge at 12:45.

Which just goes to show that even a nitwit can make it through the 100-Mile Wilderness.

When people ask me whether I've ever been lost, I'm truthful. Anyone who has hiked very much has been lost. On this first hike in the 100-Mile Wilderness, I got lost four different times, if you want to count passing up my campsite the third night. Yet I used common sense to return to my intended route. I have gotten lost in the woods as much as any person alive, but I have always figured out what to do to get back on track.

.A word of advice: never ask directions in Hot Springs, North Carolina. I keyswapped a section of the Appalachian Trail from Lemon Gap down to Hot Springs with son Andy in February 1997. After dropping him off with the guidebook at Lemon Gap to hike toward Hot Springs, I drove down to the town to find the trailhead to hike

up to meet him. We planned to spend the night at the Deer Park Mountain Shelter. I followed white blazes through town for a ways and couldn't figure out where the trailhead was. Therefore, I stopped at a convenience store and asked where to find the trailhead to hike toward Lemon Gap. "That's easy," my informant said. "Cross the bridge, turn and drive under the bridge, and you'll come to the Outdoor Center. You park down there by the river."

So I followed directions, and parked off the road in an area where I hoped I'd be out of the way of the Outdoor Center vehicles. Sure enough, I saw white blazes, and followed them up from the river to climb a steep ridge. I'd had a hard week at work, and was very tired, so I didn't make a lot of time. But by 4pm I started wondering why I hadn't come to the Deer Park Mountain Shelter. I hiked on, and around 5pm, as the sun started to set, I saw a paved road ahead. Wait! This section of the Trail didn't cross any roads. I looked at my map for the first time, studying it closely. Then it dawned on me that I had to be looking at Tanyard Gap, some miles north of Hot Springs. I had hiked north instead of south, and therefore was many miles from where I needed to be. I was nowhere near Deer Park Mountain, and didn't have time to hike back before dark. I didn't much like the idea of hiking several miles of unfamiliar trail after dark, and didn't have the energy to make it all the way back to Hot Springs and up the other side of town to the shelter in any case. So I did what I thought was the sensible thing. I was very close to Mill Ridge, which is accessible by a gravel road. There are numerous campsites on Mill Ridge, and I saw other campers spending the night. I considered it prudent to set up my tent and prepare to camp right there.

What about Andy? Well, if he stopped at the shelter and waited for me, it would take awhile for him to realize I wasn't coming. By then it might be too late for him to head on into Hot Springs. He had his sleeping bag and food and everything he needed to spend the night at the shelter. Second possibility: if he hiked all the way into Hot Springs, and reported me missing, it wouldn't take long to find me. As an Adopt-a-Trail volunteer in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and a party to more than one search for lost hikers, I knew how searches were conducted. The very first thing the rangers or police would do would be to check the trailheads in the area. That would be really simple: they would check the Outdoor Center trailhead, find my truck, and know within minutes where I had gone. It would take maybe ten minutes to drive up to Mill Ridge to check there, and I was camped right by the road, easy to find. So okay, if Andy stayed at the shelter, he'd be all right for the night, and I could get up really early and hike back down to Hot Springs to meet him. If he came down that night and filed a missing person report, I'd be found within minutes.

So much for logic. What actually happened was, Andy got concerned a bit earlier than I thought. He didn't wait at the shelter for me to show up, but hiked down into Hot

Springs to the police station and reported me missing. So far, so good. The officer assigned to the case drove around to the Outdoor Center trailhead, but that's where the situation got weird. He looked around the parking area, saw my truck, and said to himself, "There's a black Nissan pickup truck with a white topper and Tennessee license plates, and an Appalachian Trail sticker on the window. But that couldn't possibly be the one we're looking for!" So they kept searching high and low for four hours or so instead of following up on the obvious lead. If Andy had been riding along when the officer checked the trailhead, he would have recognized the truck. But the officer didn't recognize it in spite of Andy's description, so they spent a few fruitless hours pursuing other remote possibilities. It was 11pm, and I was soundly asleep in my tent at Mill Ridge, when Officer Wilton Stribling drove up and found me. They had even called my middle son Richard, back in Knoxville, Tennessee, and got him worried enough about me to drive over to Hot Springs.

Most "lost hiker" reports are resolved much more quickly. In 1994, coming back across Newfound Gap in the Smokies from a backpacking trip, Andy and I picked up a hitchhiking AT thru-hiker who needed to get down to Gatlinburg. He explained that he was extremely worried about his hiking buddy, who was supposed to be meeting him on the Trail. "It's been a week since I saw him," the hiker said. "He was behind me, but he should have caught up long ago. He does 20 and 25-mile days. If he was on the Trail, he'd have caught up. I need to get to the police department in Gatlinburg and file a missing person report."

"I've got a better idea," I said. "When we get down the mountain to Park headquarters, there's a ranger station just behind the visitor center. Let me take you to the Little River Ranger Station, and I'll bet you the rangers will know what to do."

Sure enough, I found Ranger Julie Parish, whom I knew from the Adopt-a-Trail program, on duty. I introduced the thru-hiker, and he explained his concerns.

"I'll get right on it," Julie said. "We can check back down the Trail and find out where your buddy is. We've traced a lot of hikers on the Trail. It usually takes about two hours to learn their whereabouts."

I asked if there was anything else I could do and, receiving a negative response, I wished the hiker good luck and drove on home. I feel quite sure Ranger Parish located the lost man and discovered why he wasn't hot on his friend's heels on the Trail.

The truth is, if you hike, you're going to get lost sooner or later. There are a few guidelines to remember at all times. First, if you don't know where you are, for goodness' sake stay on the trail, even if it isn't the right trail. If you've gotten off on a side trail, and don't know how to get back to where you need to be, you're always better off staying right where you are. Search and rescue personnel will always search the trails first. It's just common sense. There are a lot of acres of trackless wilderness out there, and

searching every inch takes an incredible amount of people and time. Most lost hikers have simply taken a wrong turn, and are on a side trail. So I repeat, even if you aren't on the right trail, **stay on the trail!** You will be found much sooner.

One year in the Smokies, a quartet of backpackers decided to bushwhack through the rhododendron thickets from the Fish Camp Prong Trail up to the Appalachian Trail, an elevation gain of perhaps 3000 feet. Why, I have no clue, because there is a perfectly good maintained trail called the Goshen Prong Trail which connects the two. But either these hikers didn't have a map, or they just wanted to have an off-trail adventure. They were reported missing when they didn't show up at their destination, and rangers instituted a search. Bear in mind, these adventurers could easily have hiked up the four-mile connector trail. But they wanted to take a short cut. Instead of making two miles an hour, they immersed themselves in an impenetrable rhododendron thicket which allowed them to progress at a very slow rate indeed. It took a couple of days.

As an Adopt-a-Trail volunteer, I worked under the supervision of Ranger Mike Farley. So when I went down to do my trail patrol shortly after this incident, I asked Mike about the lost hikers and their successful rescue.

"Oh," he replied. "They finally found us."

You cannot imagine how difficult it would have been for rescue personnel to try to search every inch of the mountainside. Helicopters are little use in a situation like this, because there is a thick cover of vegetation which prevents aerial search personnel from seeing people who might be hidden underneath. If the terrain is really steep, it is difficult for anyone to cover the area on foot. So, if you get nothing else out of this book, please remember: if you're going to hike, **stay on the trail!**

The second thing is, forget about getting any useful information out of moss growing on trees or that sort of thing. If you don't know where you are, how will you know whether you need to head south, north, or whatever to get back on track? And after you head in what you think is the right direction, and after you dodge boulders and cross streams, are you sure you're still going in the same direction? Unless you can fix on a visible distant landmark and move toward it, you're still clueless.

The third thing is, learn the difference between up and down. If you're hiking up a creek, and suddenly the water seems to be flowing in the wrong direction, stop right there. Don't say, "Gee, how'd it do that?" Consider the possibility that you may have reversed direction, and may be heading downward instead of upward. If you lost the trail going down, try going back up. In the Smokies a young lady was once lost for two or three days because she left a popular hiking trail and went down to the creek. She didn't know enough to climb back up, and panicked and spent two miserable nights out in cold weather huddled against a tree, lost, after which she was rescued by searchers. Had she climbed back up the ridge, she could not have failed to intersect the trail in a few yards.

As a matter of fact, a Sierra Club hiking group got lost in the Smokies about 20 years ago. I knew one of the ladies who had been on that hike, and she told me the ill-prepared hike leader had tried to take the group up Raven Fork on a trail that used to be there 50 years ago. Perhaps that was the first clue. Naturally the old trail was a bit overgrown, and it took a lot of effort to force their way through the rhododendron thickets and sawbriers and other obstacles on the way. One would think that by mid-afternoon someone would have had the second clue, which was that they weren't going to get out of the woods before dark unless they turned around.

I know it's hard to imagine that anyone could hike up a creek and not be able to find his way down. Like, maybe he could just follow the stream? But the hike leader on this memorable occasion pushed on through the vegetation, until dark fell and the group could go no farther. They then spent the night huddled together for warmth on an island in the middle of the stream, on a cold night in March. Need I add that none of those wilderness lovers had thought to bring matches or anything else to start a campfire for warmth?

It took all the next day for the group to find its way down to a road. My friend told me it was 6pm when they finally got out of the woods, very tired and hungry. Naturally, the outdoor experts who hadn't packed any matches hadn't brought any extra food either.

Anyway, the moral of the story is, if you hike up a creek, you should be able to find your way down. Think about it.

Then there are blazes. I remember hiking up from Fontana Dam in the Smokies once with friends from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club on a beautiful day in October. Late in the afternoon we stopped at Russell Field Shelter to eat a snack and rest a few minutes before doing the final five miles down to Cades Cove, where our driver awaited. We talked with the hikers who were spending the night at the shelter, and one fellow from Florida told about his adventures. Hiking southward on the AT a few days before, he had taken a wrong turn somewhere around Tricorner Knob, and had wound up at Laurel Gap Shelter, five miles off the AT, to spend the night.

How could anybody go five miles and not notice there were no white blazes? Seriously, there is a reason the AT is marked. As it says in the guidebooks, if you go more than half a mile without seeing a white blaze on a tree or rock along the route, stop and think whether you may be off the Trail. Did this hiker read the guidebook before starting out? Did he hike numerous miles on the Trail, with white blazes at regular intervals, and not recognize that was how the Trail was marked? I don't know.

Above treeline in New Hampshire, for example, there are no trees upon which to paint white blazes, so the Trail is marked by huge rock cairns. The point is, the Trail is always marked.

A GPS is a great idea. Yet it is necessary to program some information into the instrument before it can help you. I often drive to my hiking destination and set a waypoint there, then drive to my starting point and set another waypoint there. Coupled with a map and elevation profile, the GPS will give you a pretty good idea of where you are at any given time, and how far from your destination you are, as the crow flies. Hiking the AT in Maine, I kept track of my whereabouts pretty well with this aid. How much farther to the top of the mountain? The GPS altimeter isn't accurate to the inch, but it will give you a readout and state, "Accurate to within 50 feet," or whatever. You should also know that, as you gain elevation rapidly on some steep climbs, the instrument will take a minute or so to reset to the new elevation. You can stop at some point, and the GPS will still be winding up the numbers to catch up with your present location. What this means is that, as you climb, you can look at the map and elevation profile, and know that the high point of this particular stretch is at 2479 feet above sea level, or whatever. When the GPS reads 2300 and is still clicking off higher numbers, you know you're pretty close to the summit. Or if it soars to 2500, the top of the mountain is imminent.

Backpacking a section of the AT in Vermont, in September 2005, I parked at the trailhead at Highway 12 and hiked eight miles over Dana Hill the first day to end up at Thistle Hill Shelter for the night. The second day I grabbed lunch and a water bottle, and hiked up to the next road and back, a total of about nine miles. After spending a second night at the shelter, I returned the eight miles to my truck at Highway 12. In between, before ascending Dana Hill, the Trail crosses Woodstock Stage Road. According to the elevation profile, the elevation at that point is 1050 feet. However, my GPS reset to 800 feet instead. I climbed and climbed, and thought I'd never get to the 1200' mark. Considering that this was supposedly a gain of only 150 vertical feet, I was inclined to believe the GPS reading of 800' at the road. The top of Dana Hill is at 1500 feet, and my GPS did give me that reading when I finally reached the top. So I strongly suspect that the printed information I had was in error. Without the GPS I would not have had a clue why it took me so long to ascend Dana Hill.

A GPS has a compass function, which shows the bearing at any given point. On some trails, as you switchback and detour up and around mountains, the compass may actually show you moving away from your destination point. This just means that trails are rarely a straight line. In open country it is possible to pick a destination point and progress toward it with little deviation. By contrast, in the mountains, you have to follow the terrain.

There is also the fact that, in order to work, a GPS has to be in a location where it can receive information from satellites. If you're down in a hollow between ridges where the instrument can't "see" four satellites, it won't give you a reading – just as a cellular phone won't work in certain locations either. I've been on the side of a rocky ridge many

times and been unable to get a reading because the GPS can't "see" through that rock formation. I recall that a hiker in the Smokies a few years ago decided he wanted to do some off-trail exploration up from a Cades Cove Loop Road trailhead with the aid of his newly-purchased GPS unit. He apparently didn't know this simple fact, and therefore was lost for two days on what should have been an excursion of a few hours.

If you want to get useful information from a GPS, you must be in a fairly open area, or near a mountain summit, where the GPS can pick up signals. As for the lost hiker in the Cades Cove area, I suspect that he set a waypoint at the trailhead and thought he could make his way back with no difficulty. This is true in theory, but when the signal disappears, it is necessary to fall back on low-tech skills such as listening for the sound of traffic on the road, or climbing to a vantage point where the road is visible, and so on.

I learned a lot about off-trail bushwhacking from a fellow named Charlie Klabunde, of the Smoky Mountain Hiking Club. Charlie was an adventurous sort, and loved wandering off from the group on club hikes. The trouble was, he would inevitably attract a following of individuals who didn't have a clue what he was doing. Then the hike leader would not know where everyone was, and it caused consternation more than once. On my first trip as a hike leader, in 1990, we had a number of stream crossings to do. We got within a quarter-mile of the trailhead, and reached a crossing that was too deep to negotiate with dry feet. I knew we'd be at our cars within fifteen minutes, so I didn't worry too much about getting our feet wet. I looked for the shallowest crossing, then turned around. To my great surprise, there went Charlie, climbing up a cliff to avoid crossing the stream. And most of our hiking group was following him.

"Okay," I said, "if you are all determined to climb that cliff, I think I'd better follow and make sure you don't get lost." I knew that if we climbed over the ridge, we'd have to come down the other side toward the Pigeon River. A gravel road would be between us and the river, so all we had to do was to head toward the sound of water. We wouldn't come down to the road where we wanted to be, but it would be a short walk back up the road to the trailhead. As I climbed over the ridge, I encountered some confused members of our group who didn't have a clue what to do.

"Charlie just kind of disappeared. We couldn't keep up with him," one complained.

"Well, he isn't the hike leader," I pointed out. "He isn't responsible for you. I am. So let's just head toward the sound of the river, and we'll get to the road."

When we arrived at the trailhead, my rear leader expressed great surprise that she and the slower hikers had reached their destination before the front leader. But when I explained to her what had happened, she said, "Oh, I see. You've been initiated."

I did many off-trail hikes with Charlie, and picked up a lot of pointers about terrain and common sense ways to find my way through the woods. When he was the

hike leader, he was the most responsible, most scrupulous leader anyone could want. He took care of his people. It was only when he wasn't leading that he felt free to be misleading.

Anyway. In December 2003 I did an overnight backpacking loop in the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, around Bald River Falls. I had figured to hike from the trailhead at the falls the first day, hike 4.8 miles up to a Forest Service road, then follow the road 1.8 miles to the Basin Lead trailhead. From there I would complete a loop by hiking six more miles down to the road at the Tellico River and a mile or two up the road back to Bald River Falls. I had thought to camp overnight somewhere on the Bald River Falls Trail, but for once I moved faster than anticipated. I was at the Forest Service road before I knew it, and needed to camp for the night. I have never seen the point in backtracking, but I couldn't do another 1.8 miles before dark. As I walked down the road a bit, I saw parking areas and such, so I picked one such area that was a little way off the road and looked as though it would be a suitable campsite. I spent a cold night there, wakened frequently by packs of hunting dogs yelping their way through the woods, and continued in the morning. Doing an extra mile or so the first day meant that my second day's hike would be a bit shorter than anticipated.

When I reached the Basin Lead trailhead and prepared to proceed into the woods, I was stopped short by a sign saying that the footbridge across the Tellico River was out. In order to reach the road and walk back to my truck, I would have to cross the raging river, and I wasn't about to try to wade it. What did I want to do? I sat down, ate a packet of cheese crackers, and thought about it long and hard. I didn't want to retrace my steps to Bald River Falls; I wanted to complete the loop. So I figured, if I could think like Charlie Klabunde, I could find a way to do this. I knew that the road crossed to this side of the river at some point before the falls. If I hiked the trail down to the river, then bushwhacked along the bank for a mile or two, I would find the road on my side of the river, and would be able to walk safely back to the falls. I had my GPS, with the trailhead set as a destination point, in case there was anything else I couldn't figure out.

The woods were full of hunters that day. After I'd gone a mile or so, I met one on the trail, so I inquired about the missing bridge, the status of the river, and so on. He allowed that the river was up, and the current swift; I certainly didn't want to try to cross it on foot. The third hunter I met confirmed what the first two had told me, but added an interesting bit of information: there was an old Boy Scout trail that went off to the right at some point, and terminated right at the falls, a shortcut that would save me a couple of miles of bushwhacking. This sounded more interesting.

The next hunter I met had more explicit directions: "Yeah, that'd get you down to the falls the easiest way. In about a mile, you'll come to a heavy blowdown area on top of the ridge. The Scout trail peels off to your right at that point; there'll be a marker. You can

see the Tellico River and hear the falls from there."

This seemed eminently reasonable. Why not cut two or three miles off my trip by taking this shortcut? I wouldn't hike that last mile down to the river, nor bushwhack a mile or two. Instead, it would be a fairly easy quarter of a mile.

As it happened, I got to the point on the ridge that the hunter had described, and I saw a trail marker off to the right, which I assumed was the start of the Boy Scout trail. After following it for 100 yards or so, I reached a lot of tangled blowdowns, which finally became virtually impassible. What did I want to do? I didn't feel like fighting my way back through the downed trees. The GPS confirmed that I was about a quarter of a mile from the falls as the crow flies. I was definitely headed toward the falls; all I had to do was to make my way down the ridge.

Probably that trail was there 20 or 30 years ago, just like the one on Raven Fork in the Smokies. Over a period of years, it had become overgrown and unrecognizable. So I gave up expecting a trail, and just headed downward the shortest way I could, through fairly open country. I heard intermittent traffic sounds, which told me the road wasn't that far off, if I could just cover the intervening terrain. The big issue was, I had to hike safely and not get hurt, because it would be very difficult to get help off trail. I worked my way around and down off a knob, knowing that once I got down into a hollow, the GPS would quit picking up a signal. But here's the second piece of logic that reduced the risk of this short cut: when I got down a ways, I hit a dry streambed. If you know anything at all about the natural world, you know that water unerringly flows downward. Any streams on that slope of the ridge would automatically have to drain into the Tellico River, and at this point the road would be between me and the river. Therefore, if I followed the course of the streambed, I certainly had to reach the road. My years of hiking with Charlie had at least taught me that much.

It wasn't a straight course by any means; streams meander this way and that, coming down the mountain. Yet the streambed was the easiest walking I could do, as opposed to trying to clamber over rock formations and such. At a couple of points I found traces of the old trail, which followed the stream. It took me over two hours to travel that quarter of a mile, because it wasn't just walking in a straight line, and there were obstacles in the form of brush and blowdowns. Yet I never doubted that I was going in the right direction, and finally I rounded the next-to-last turn in the stream and saw blacktop in front of me. I slid down the last 50 feet of embankment onto the road and found myself within 50 feet of the falls, almost right at my truck.

I got out of the woods before dark, without having been in any undue danger. Thank God.

And thank you, Charlie Klabunde.

CHAPTER 6: BLACK BEARS, BLACKFLIES, BLACKSNAKES AND OTHER CRITTERS

Yes, we interact with other forms of life out there in the mountains. That is part of the wonder of nature. Yet there are certain forms of life we would prefer to interact with at a distance, rather than up close.

Black bears are of enormous interest among hikers and non-hikers alike. One of the questions I answer most frequently is, "Do you ever see any bears?"

If you hike the mountains of the Appalachian chain long enough, you will see black bears. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is legendary for its bears, yet I have often hiked the trails in the park for two years without seeing a single bear. My son Andy logged 2000 miles of trails in the Smokies before he ever saw his first bear. By contrast, I backpacked through Shenandoah National Park on the Appalachian Trail in several trips and saw more black bears than I'd seen in the Smokies in several years. Hiking along one day, I saw a black bear rooting around up ahead. So I stopped; the bear looked up and saw me, and skedaddled off into the brush. But wait! There went a cub right after mama. *Cool!* I thought, and I started walking again. A few seconds later a black blur came sliding down a tree and disappeared in the same direction – the second cub.

Bears are usually fun-loving, non-aggressive creatures. However, if tempted by food or confronted by what they see as threatening behavior by humans, watch out! My friend Jenny Whited had a close encounter one spring while hiking with a group up to Spence Field in the Smokies. She stopped at a trail junction to read the map, and suddenly became aware that a big bear was reading the map over her shoulder. We assumed that she had something in her pack for lunch that had attracted his attention. Anyway, no violence occurred, but these close encounters do happen.

Another hiking buddy told me that a friend of his had a picture of himself sitting on a big log on the Abrams Creek Trail in the Smokies. Seated right next to him was a black bear.

Don't underestimate the danger of interacting with our ursine friends. One year in the Smokies, a woman was mauled to death by a bear near a popular hiking trail. I don't think the authorities ever learned for sure what set off the attack.

Probably the most important thing to know about black bears is that they are omnivorous creatures, and they are always interested in food. If you don't want to have an unpleasant encounter with a bear, therefore, don't tempt him with food. I've simply learned not to take aromatic food with me on the trail, i.e., I won't open a can of sardines at a campsite. I've figured out ways to containerize food so that it presents no appeal to wild critters. I know, the conventional wisdom is to hang your food ten feet high from

tree branches. The trouble with this is, when Andy and I backpacked in the Smokies, we found that at every established campsite, the tree branches at the proper height had all been broken off by campers who hung too-heavy burdens upon them. Too often we found no way to hang food out of the reach of bears. I read one popular book on backpacking in the Smokies, in which the author recommended cooking up steaks over the campfire. Hey, could a bear possibly smell that?

On one trail maintaining trip in 1996, Andy and I and Matthew, the son of a friend, backpacked up the Jakes Creek Trail to Campsite 26 on Miry Ridge on a Friday night. We planned to ascend a few more miles to the Appalachian Trail the next day to cut brush on the Trail. Since I didn't get off work until 5pm, we started up the Jakes Creek Trail after 6. Because it's a fairly easy trail, we anticipated no difficulty in hiking a bit after dark, especially since I believe there was a moon. It was actually 10:30 when we pulled into the campsite.

There were several other campers at this popular site. We tried not to disturb them as we pitched tents and cooked a not-very-appetizing evening meal. I started gathering our food to hang. Matthew said, "Actually, I was just going to keep my food in my tent."

I fixed him with a look. "Oh, you mean you want the bear in your tent?"

Which is what can happen, given the appetite of black bears.

So Matthew gave me his food to store in a communal bag, which we hung from some branches. I also had some food items in a lock-top Rubbermaid container, which I left sitting on the ground by the fire ring. Nothing was disturbed overnight. We ate breakfast and slackpacked with lunch, water and tools another four miles or so up to the AT, where we started attacking blackberry briars. After an hour or two, one of the other campers who had been with us overnight passed us on the Trail. "By the way," he said, "right after you left, a bear came into camp and raided everything. He tore up somebody's pack to get at food, and that bag you hung on the rope, well, the bear pulled on the rope and slid the bag right into his paws. Whatever you had in that bag, he got it."

Since we had brought lunch with us, we weren't starving. But at the end of our work day, when we returned to camp to pack up and hike back to the trailhead, we found a mess. We shrugged, packed up what was left, and headed back to the truck. Early Monday morning I called one of the park rangers, described our experience, and recommended that the campsite be closed immediately, or that a bear box (a heavy steel box like a dumpster, only smaller) be installed at the campsite for campers to store their food. It's standard procedure when there is a bear problem at a campsite.

After this experience and one other in the Smokies, I figured out something. The food we had in a lock-top container wasn't bothered overnight, yet the food we rigorously hung by tree branches became the bear's lunch. I thought, if we couldn't hang our food to be safe, how about simply placing it in a lock-top container that a bear

couldn't open?

After Andy had left for college, I tested my theory on several subsequent solo backpacking trips. Over a period of a few years, I hiked and backpacked every trail in the Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area, on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. I also backpacked many sections of the Appalachian Trail up into Virginia. When I packed my food for the journey, I put everything in Zip-lock plastic bags, then containerized it into a Rubbermaid lock-top container. First, this provided no easy access for a bear. Second, it minimized any food odors that might be emitted. I have never since been threatened by a black bear. At first I placed the food container in the crotch of a tree, and secured it with the ubiquitous yellow rope. I figured that if a bear was going to be attracted to the container, and go after it, he would have a hard time getting at the food. He'd have to defeat the wraparound of yellow rope, then he'd have to figure out how to open the lock-top container itself. Would you believe, my food never attracted any attention from the wildlife whatsoever?

A fellow in New Jersey told me that Jersey bears are smart enough to home in on such containers. Maybe so, but I can attest to the fact that Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Maryland and Pennsylvania bears have shown no interest, especially after I loaded the containers back in my pack, out of sight.

The lock-top containers weigh very little, and are a convenient way to organize food and related items. Strangely, over the years I've never seen any other backpackers doing this. In every guidebook, and at every shelter, there is a notice advising backpackers not to cook inside the shelters, lest they create enticing odors to attract black bears. Yet at many shelters where I've stayed the night with other hikers, I've seen others cooking inside the shelter, and storing their food at night in stuff sacks hanging from the rafters at an accessible height. It's a wonder there haven't been more bear incidents, but then, maybe most bears are inhibited by the presence of groups of people.

50=60 years ago people didn't know any better than to feed the bears, and this led to unnatural and dangerous situations. I was four years old when our family took a drive through Canada's Banff National Park. To put things in perspective, my father was a paraplegic and could not drive the car, nor do various other things non-handicapped people could do. It wasn't until 1954 that my father was able to buy a car he could drive, with an automatic transmission and manual controls. So my mother was driving the old stick-shift Model T, with me and my baby brother in the back seat. No, there were no seat belts or kiddie seats 60 years ago either.

We had brought along a loaf of bread with which to feed ourselves and the bears. Because of the ignorance of tourists, the bears in that park had developed a taste for people food, and were only too eager to approach any car that slowed down. As we drove along, one of the four-legged moochers appeared, so my mother obligingly

stopped and tossed a slice of bread out the window. Unfortunately, the Model T's engine chose that moment to sputter and die, so that we could not move on. My mother cranked up the window, in case the bear should get too friendly. However, our old rattletrap had a number of peculiarities, including a trick window on the driver's side which did not fully close. The bear hooked the claws of one big paw in the crack between the window and the frame, and brought the window all the way down. Now, all of a sudden, he was breathing down my mother's neck, and the engine was stalled so that she couldn't just put it in gear and drive away.

My father did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He had one last slice of bread in the wrapper, and only one chance to distract the bear long enough for my mother to gather her wits about her and restart the vehicle. He frantically waved that last piece of bread to get the bear's attention, and threw it out the window on the passenger side.

The bear galloped around to snag the bread. In the few seconds that he was thus occupied, my mother managed to restart the car and drive away unhurt.

Why my parents thought it was a good idea to feed the bears in the first place, I have no clue. They had grown up together in northern Idaho, the children of homesteaders in a remote area where they attended a one-room school. Wildlife was all around them, so surely they knew wild animals' habits very well. My father had trapped and hunted in the mountains, growing up; he could quote chapter and verse on animal behavior. At least he knew very well when my mother was in mortal danger, and knew to take action.

Well, let's see, what other creatures can one encounter on the Trail? In spite of all the stories about mice, I've never been bothered by them in a shelter. One of the fellows who stayed with me at Trapper John Shelter in New Hampshire swore that he had spent the night at a shelter farther south that was infested with the little rascals. He said one of the other backpackers set out three mousetraps at night, and the darned things kept going off all night. In the morning this enterprising fellow laid out thirteen dead mice in a row on the floor.

I do know from personal testimony that a couple of the shelters in the Smokies had a resident skunk. This made for some interesting possibilities.

Dogs turn up in the most surprising places. During my years of hiking the Smokies, I often encountered dogs on the trails, although it is forbidden for hikers to take dogs with them on the trails. There's a sign at every trailhead prohibiting dogs, but nobody pays much attention.

In October 1994 an event called Hurricane Opal sent high winds into the high Smoky Mountains, with the result that we had massive blowdowns on the trails in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. As it happened, I had organized a day hike the

following weekend for myself, Andy, and friends. We started at a certain point down in North Carolina, off the Lakeshore Road, and hiked up to a certain trail junction, then down to another point on the road, where a ride awaited. The creeks were still full of water. A few miles into our hike, we encountered an obviously lost hunting dog. After feeding the near-starving dog some snacks from our packs, I used some of our ubiquitous yellow rope to fashion a leash, and thus compelled the dog to follow us on our hike. The reason for the dog's being lost soon became evident. There were several creek crossings on our route. As I recall, we met the dog between crossing #1 and #2. She was apparently intimidated by the rushing water, and did not want to cross the creeks to get out of the woods. When we approached crossing #2, she hung back and did not want to accompany us on our trek. So I sent Andy across the creek with the end of the improvised leash in his hand, and instructed him to pull strongly once he was established. The dog then had no option but to swim the creek and reach the other side.

We hiked all day with that dog. When we reached the high point of our hike, somehow a second dog appeared, with a radio collar. One of our party figured that the appearance and age of both animals suggested they were mother and son. Anyway, they seemed to know each other, and had no difficulty proceeding down the trail together. We tied a second length of yellow rope to the younger male dog's collar and led him along.

Because of the proliferation of blowdowns on the trail, due to high winds, we had to detour often to avoid obstacles. Hikers could get through; horses would have found the path impassable. My friend Anna Marie Stefanick suggested that I wrap the ends of the rope around my waist, rather than trying to control the dogs with my hands; it saved me a lot of energy. Anyway, when we got within half a mile of the trailhead on Lakeshore Road, the younger dog started pulling on the improvised leash like crazy. He apparently sensed something up ahead. When we came out to the trailhead a few minutes later, we found two good ol' boys with a pickup truck, a radio control device, and a horse trailer. They apparently had planned to ride up the trail with the radio locator to try to find their dogs. Frankly, I don't think a horse could have made it through.

During the season it's easy to stumble across a yellow jacket nest, usually a hole in the ground or in an old stump. Yellow jackets usually have a few scouts roaming around, while the bulk of the colony remains out of sight. However, I've been told that if you make the mistake of killing a yellow jacket, the rest of the colony will smell death and attack you in force. I've never tested that theory. I've been stung a few times, but have never been attacked by a whole horde of the ornery insects. I did talk to one man who had blundered into a large nest of yellow jackets, and had been stung approximately 200 times. Although he was not normally allergic to the stings, 200 hits had a marked effect. He came near to dying from the attack.

Those who are allergic to yellow jacket stings need immediate medical attention if

they happen to be stung even once. I believe the usual first aid remedy is a shot of epinephrine. Without it the victim can experience swelling of the entire body tissue, which means the airways will swell shut and result in suffocation from inability to breathe. I personally know hikers who carry a shot of epinephrine in their first aid kit at all times, just in case.

The wildlife that has caused me the most suffering is the common blackfly, a small, gnat-like insect to whose bites I am allergic. Having grown up in Louisiana, I knew all about mosquitoes; they'd bite, and I'd itch, but the next day I couldn't tell where they'd been. So I wasn't really intimidated by biting insects until I started hiking the mountains. By the way, the farther north one travels on the Appalachian Trail, the larger, more voracious, more numerous, and more aggressive the blackflies become. In the Smokies they are present roughly five months out of the year, in varying numbers. Usually it's possible to keep them at bay with a good insect repellent, but the little devils are cunning enough to figure out where there is no repellent. They will bite under your watchband, or any other place they can reach where you've neglected to spray. A headnet is a good solution. Other supposed preventatives are worthless.

At various times friends of mine proposed surefire ways to keep blackflies away. One swore that eating garlic would do the trick, so I ingested garlic tablets for a couple of weeks. The blackflies swarmed around me and bit anyway. Another person urged me to smear myself with Avon Skin-So-Soft. Let me tell you, they ate that stuff up as though it were candy. I got a bite on one earlobe, and the next day that ear was twice the size of the other. Skin-So-Soft may very well be effective against mosquitoes, but it definitely does not repel blackflies. Then somebody else sold me some Aloe Vera lotion that was supposed to do the trick; same result. What I want to emphasize is that mosquitoes and blackflies are two completely different insects, and what works to repel one will not necessarily work to repel the other.

I met a fellow from Maine while I was hiking through Shenandoah National Park. He imparted to me his strategy for dealing with blackflies: eat lots of garlic, don't bathe or put aromatic substances on your body, and don't eat meat for at least two days before going into the woods. If anyone wants to try that, let me know how it works. It sounds like a lot of trouble to me – but then, so is being bitten.

Basically, I need to stay out of the woods at those times when blackflies are swarming. When one of them scores a good hit, the resulting bite usually swells, itches, and oozes pus for a week afterward. If I'm lucky, that's all that will happen. Unfortunately, sometimes the bites itch so intolerably that I scratch too much and get them infected. I had a rash all over my upper left arm for a couple of months once from an infected bite. The tiny spots would heal, and then they'd reappear, loaded with more pus, and itching anew. I have found that if I'll apply Gold Bond ointment, the bites will

usually heal within a few days. One time when I had some particularly badly infected bites, I apparently scratched and then transferred some of the oozing pus to my face. I developed a very noticeable red rash on one side of my face, and wasn't sure what was causing it, so I went to the doctor. He ruled out most of the common causes of such rashes, and kept looking at it and shaking his head. "I've never seen anything quite like it," he kept muttering. He theorized that my infected insect bites might have something to do with it. But he prescribed an antibiotic, which cleared it up right away.

As I'm not a fan of antibiotics, I prefer to treat insect bites with a topical ointment. However, if an infection of this sort gets out of hand again, I'll probably have no choice.

When I entered the 100-Mile Wilderness in June 2002, I did have my headnet, and I did wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt. But in Maine, in June, the blackflies are at the height of their season. They make up for a relatively short life span by being three times as vicious as their cousins in the Smokies. Had I waited until August, I could have avoided most of the grief. As it turned out, I was better off for the rain that commenced my second day out, and continued into the third. It kept the blackflies at bay. When I came out to Abol Bridge the fourth day, the weather was clear, and they were clustering around my head. They were a big part of my decision not to do the rest of the Wilderness that year.

Some of my schoolteacher friends, who have only June and July for summer vacation, might have gone to Maine with me if I could have gone during those months. But the clouds of blackflies were simply too much for me, and I refused to consider it. Instead, I waited until late August 2003 to return to the Trail in Maine, and hiked the rest of the Wilderness by myself. My friends assured me that the insects would all be gone by August. Therefore, I didn't bother with the headnet when I started out on that week-long trek. My first day out, I discovered that what they meant was, the insects were all gone except for the regular flies, mosquitoes, and yellow jackets.

I hiked the remaining sections of southern Maine in 2005, starting the first week of August. I thought the blackflies would be gone, and Maine natives assured me that most years they disappear around the middle of July. Yet, as I backpacked the Mahoosuc Range, I had to wear the net as often as not. I did receive several bites, which factored into my decision to cut short my trip and get out of the woods a couple of days early.

Snakes are rarely a problem, especially at higher elevations. One day in the 100-Mile Wilderness I saw three garter snakes, but they're harmless creatures. So are the long black snakes. On rare occasions I have seen rattlers, and got a real scare one day from a copperhead. Eastern rattlesnakes seem to have a fairly placid disposition, and characteristically will slither away to avoid confrontation with humans. However, Dick Ketelle of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club told me of an incident many years ago when he was taking a photograph of a rattler which lay coiled up on a rock several feet

below him. His flashbulb went off, and an instant later the snake struck at the place where Dick's hand had been half a second earlier. My guess is that the flashbulb frightened the snake and triggered the attack. Normally a rattlesnake will shake his tail if he's disturbed, so as to warn away what he sees as an intruder.

In contrast, copperheads will strike without warning, and they are aggressive. One year, on the first of November, Andy and I were hiking down the Sugarland Mountain Trail in the Smokies ahead of three friends. It had been a warm day, but in November who was thinking of snakes?

I happened to be in the lead, moving fast to get down off the mountain before dark. About a mile from the trailhead, I rounded a turn in the trail and froze in mid-stride. "Stop, Andy," I said. The sun had already set, and twilight was coming on, but somehow my brain registered a shape, or movement, of something in the leaf-covered trail dead ahead, not two steps away. It was the biggest copperhead snake I'd ever seen. Probably it had come out during the day to soak up sun, and the ground was still warm, so it had remained in place. The dry brown leaves formed a camouflage pattern which made it hard to spot. Nevertheless, as I say, something alerted me, and I stopped. I held out my walking stick, and the snake struck at it – not very encouraging for a peaceful solution to the encounter.

The snake was right in the middle of the trail and spoiling for a fight. "Okay, Andy," I said, "now you'll find out why your mom carries a walking stick."

I quickly shoved the end of the stick beneath the snake's coils and flipped him ten feet away. Unfortunately, the spot where he landed was still in the middle of the trail, just farther away from us. So I had to walk up and flip him again, whereupon he landed in a clump of brush off the trail. We ran past before the snake could recover from this insult and gather himself to attack again. I feel pretty sure that after being flipped twice, the copperhead didn't hang around to do battle with our friends who came along ten minutes or so later. He must have hurried back to his hole and stayed for the winter.

In New England there are moose, which seem to be rather shy creatures. I've never heard of anyone suffering a moose attack. In fact, on my first expedition in the 100-Mile Wilderness, I must have stepped over 500 piles of moose droppings without seeing a single moose. Most of the times when I've seen moose, it has been early morning or evening. They appear to be nocturnal animals. When I drove up to Baxter State Park, early in the morning, I encountered a moose standing right in the middle of the road.

Backpacking near Caratunk, Maine in October 2003, I heard moose bellowing all night long, but never caught a glimpse of the animals themselves. I believe their mating season had started. Their love cries woke me up several times.

In 2005 I saw no moose in Maine or New Hampshire, but I did see them in Vermont and Massachusetts. Camped at Douglas Shelter in Vermont, near Stratton Pond,

I was heating water for my evening meal on a foggy, rainy late afternoon when something big and black moved past the edge of the shelter front, in my peripheral vision. I did a double take. It was the biggest, blackest, sleekest moose I'd ever seen – and almost close enough to touch. He wasn't looking in my direction. He moved in a slow and stately fashion into the tall grass in front of the shelter, and apparently never noticed me at all until I reached for my camera. No pictures!

Between Goddard and Kid Gore shelters in Vermont, I saw two moose in the late afternoon. One walked the Trail about 50 yards in front of me for a quarter of a mile, staying just far enough ahead that I couldn't get a picture.

Then in Massachusetts, as I headed up Mount Greylock in late afternoon, I spotted a moose crossing the Trail not far ahead of me. Of course he was long gone by the time I reached the spot where he'd crossed.

Tent camping at Cloud Pond in the 100-Mile Wilderness, in 2003, I was cooking breakfast when I heard a loud splash in the pond. I looked up and saw a moose having her morning bath, splashing around and watching me, as I watched her. I shot several photos. Then the next day I fell in the water, crossing Big Wilson Creek, and drowned the camera. I wish I'd finished that roll of film and had it stashed in a waterproof film canister, but it was still in the camera, and thus was ruined. I guess you'll just have to take my word for it.

On Sinking Creek Mountain in Virginia, my companion and I encountered a herd of wild goats. They certainly were friendly, and didn't seem dangerous.

Also in Virginia, around Mt. Rogers, I ran across the wild ponies that roam the balds. On one backpacking trip near Rhododendron Gap, I stopped to cook a meal, and the ponies became so curious they wouldn't leave me alone. I had to beat them off with my walking stick.

Whitetail deer, of course, are most everywhere. They abound in the Smokies. As I hiked through Shenandoah National Park in October, I saw several fine 6-and-8-point bucks. One stood with his antlers held high and seemed to be posing for me. Since October is in the mating season, more bucks were visible than would normally be the case. I would occasionally run across a circle where two bucks had scuffed up the ground in the process of locking horns in their duel over a doe.

The only place you won't see many whitetail deer is the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Guide Art Jolin told me that about 30 years ago, a hard winter greatly reduced the deer population. Then, because of short-sighted game management policies by the State of New Hampshire, the herd never had a chance to rebuild to its former numbers. He claimed a hiker would probably see more moose and black bears than deer. I certainly never saw a deer in New Hampshire.

In New England there are notices in a number of outhouses advising hikers to

keep the doors shut to keep out porcupines. It seems the porcupines also love to chew the wood of the doors. I did once come upon one of the creatures shuffling down the Trail ahead of me – didn't get close enough to be attacked by the quills, though.

Wildlife is one of the reasons hikers walk the Trail, but the creatures are not always benevolent. Be advised.

CHAPTER 7: CAMPING, LEGAL AND ILLEGAL

Because most of the Appalachian Trail passes through public lands, there is a confusing variety of rules and regulations regarding overnight camping. Is a campfire allowed? How many campers can occupy a site? Are reservations required? And on and on.

National Parks tend to be more structured about the issue. Until recently, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park did not officially allow tent camping around shelter sites. As a Park Service volunteer, I once talked with a couple who were thru-hiking the Trail. They expressed dismay at the many hikers who built fires at the shelters.

"Well, that's permitted," I explained. "That's why the shelters have fireplaces and fire rings. As long as campers keep the fire in the fireplace or fire ring, it's perfectly legal."

Then they said something about how they had tent camped outside a shelter.

"Actually, you were violating the regulations by tent camping," I said. "The Great Smoky Mountains National Park does not officially allow tenting around the shelters. Not that I'll turn you in, but I think you should know that."

They were embarrassed. They hadn't fully read and understood the camping regulations in the Smokies.

Realistically, when a shelter is full to overcrowded, it makes sense for hikers to tent camp outside the shelter if they can't make it to the next campsite or shelter. Personally, I'd rather see a couple of tents than to try to fit 13 people into an 8-person shelter. And in case you're wondering, theoretically overnighters must make a reservation (no fee) to stay at campsites or shelters in the Smokies. In theory, the Park staff can refuse further reservations after the capacity of a certain site is filled, and thus avoid overcrowding. In practice, however, many backpackers do not bother to register, or do not realize they are supposed to do so. In a park with over 100,000 legal backpackers using the sites every year, this can cause chaos.

The shelter at Icewater Spring in the Smokies has a sleeping capacity of 12 persons. Yet one Saturday morning, as I went down the Trail with my volunteer crew to do maintenance, we passed the shelter and found, from talking to backpackers, that there had been 22 overnighters there the night before. Overcrowding was a constant problem during spring break and during the northbound thru-hiker season.

The Park officials finally made some changes in the regulations. For one thing, they started issuing permits only to thru-hikers during the season. There are 99 other campsites in the Park, where weekend backpackers can go and spend the night in a less crowded spot. Then, in recent years, they started allowing tent camping at shelter sites. The Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, responsible for most of the maintenance on the Trail through the Smokies, did a lot of renovations, placed privies at shelters that had not

heretofore had them, and generally improved the experience of backpackers on the Appalachian Trail in the Smokies.

I always try to practice what is called no-trace camping. The theory is that when I leave a campsite, nobody should be able to tell I've been there. Even building a campfire is something to avoid unless it's absolutely necessary. Therefore, I carry my little Esbit stove to boil water, and if I can't burn my trash, I pack it out with me. Recently I was at a gathering where someone talked about camping and burying trash. Burying is a definite no-no; if we can't burn it, we need to carry it out with us. Modern backcountry managers greatly frown upon digging of any sort at campsites. On the Trail, most established shelters and campsites have a privy. Strangely enough, there seems to be a problem with campers disposing of their trash in the privy instead of carrying it out. This causes numerous problems for the volunteers who take care of the campsites and shelters.

Sometimes it isn't possible to camp at an established campsite or shelter, and this is where it is important to follow the no-trace rules. Many times I've had to camp illegally, outside the designated sites, for logistical reasons. When I overshot the Rainbow Spring campsite in Maine, for example, it wasn't practical to go back two miles or so. I simply found a spot of level ground along the shore of Rainbow Lake and pitched my tent a ways off the Trail. I had a water source in the lake, and I could use my Esbit stove anywhere. In the interest of not disturbing the natural surroundings, I did not move rocks around to make a fire ring or anything of the sort. When I arose in the morning, I packed up very early and got going, in case there might be a morning patrol to snare illegal campers. Where I had slept, I scattered leaves to erase the depression left by the tent, and I packed up my trash to carry out. Anyone walking by could not tell I had camped there overnight. Interestingly enough, after I'd gone half a mile or so, I saw someone else's tent still up near the Trail. I apparently wasn't the only one who couldn't make it to a legal campsite for the night.

Likewise, when I backpacked the section of the Trail between Caratunk and Long Falls Dam Road in Maine, in 2003, I knew there was no point in trying to stay at either of the legal shelters on this 17-mile section. It was too difficult for me to try to do it all on a day hike. Starting at Caratunk, I couldn't catch the canoe ferry across the Kennebec River before 9am to start. The first shelter was about three miles in. Well, did I want to stop for the night after doing only three miles? Of course not. But if I wanted to make it to the second shelter, I'd have to do an impossible (for me) 14 miles that day, after getting a late start. I naturally did the sensible thing, which was to hike eight or nine miles, then spend the night on the bank of East Carry Pond. I wasn't the only one who ever did this – there was a fire ring, indicating that others had camped there before, probably for the same reason.

The point is, no matter how much we want to cooperate with the regulations set

forth by the public land managers, sometimes safety considerations make it advisable to camp where we must. Many years ago some of my friends from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club were on a scouting expedition on an unfamiliar trail in the winter. They knew pretty well where they were, but they had taken much longer to get there than anticipated, and darkness started to fall. For the sake of safety, they didn't care to hike several more miles in the snow after dark to a legal campsite. So they made camp where they could, and were discovered by an enforcement ranger who wrote them a ticket. (This was back in the days when the Park Service actually had enough funding to keep some rangers patrolling the trails. The chances of that happening today are very slim.) I forget what the outcome was, but they had to appear in court in Gatlinburg, Tennessee to answer charges of illegal camping. I believe there was a fine involved.

In a lot of National Forest areas, it is permissible to camp wherever one can. Yet in areas of higher use, there are more restrictive regulations. If I were to give some general principles, I would say: (1) Look for an established campsite where there is already a fire ring; don't construct one. (2) If there is no fire ring, use a camp stove instead. (3) Try to get out of sight of the Trail if you can.

In June 1995 I was leading a trail crew out from Clingmans Dome. We were shuttling a vehicle down to the Elkmont campground to be at the end of our 16-mile hike, and so I was standing around at Park Headquarters with other crew members, waiting for our ride up to Clingmans Dome to start the day's activities. I glanced over across the lawn and did a double-take. Some camper had illegally pitched a tent right on the lawn at the Sugarlands Visitor Center.

I went inside to report this. The volunteer at the desk said, "Oh, I sort of noticed that when I came in."

But she hadn't told anybody, mind you.

So I suggested that if an enforcement ranger wasn't on the premises, maybe it would be a good idea to radio out and have the ranger come deal with the situation. After all, if one tent is set up on the lawn at the Visitors Center today, next week there will be 20.

Hiking the AT out of Low Gap in Tennessee toward Holston Lake, in May 1999, I was horrified to find a bunch of clueless campers 100 yards up the Trail in a car. They had set up a tent, with a huge campfire blazing right in the middle of the Trail, contrary to all regulations and good common sense. $\frac{1}{4}$ mile up the Trail there is a legal campsite, but either they didn't know this, or were too lazy to lug their gear $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. When I encountered some hikers headed back toward Low Gap, I asked them to report the miscreants to the Forest Service office. A precedent like that could result in complete chaos, if multiple parties decided to establish campsites and fire rings everywhere in the middle of the Trail. Anyway, when I returned the following day, they were gone.

Probably the most embarrassing episode of my backpacking career occurred in the fall of 2002, in Shenandoah National Park. I was backpacking the section of the AT between Bootens Gap and Thornton Gap, with the assistance of a shuttle driver. I left my pack strategically at the Skyland center, so that I could make more time slackpacking through the day, then retrieve the pack to continue a bit further and find a campsite for the night. When I got to the recreation area at Skyland, dusk was rapidly falling. I needed to find a campsite before dark. But for a ways north from Skyland, the AT follows the Skyland nature trail. It was definitely not legal to camp along the nature trail, yet I wasn't going to be able to cover enough ground to get away from the nature trail before dark.

I figured, how many people are going to be out hiking the nature trail after dark on a chilly evening? Who's to know?

So I set up my tent on the only patch of level ground I could find, which was a few yards off the nature trail. As I cooked supper, numerous late hikers came traipsing down the trail with flashlights in hand, and greeted me. So much for being invisible.

I awoke very early the next morning and packed up, with the thought of being on down the Trail before a ranger might come looking for me with a citation. As I hid my overnight pack in the bushes and prepared to move on, at first light, here came the first nature trail hiker of the morning. Unreal!

Life at the designated campsites and shelters can be interesting. Remember, hiking the Trail is a social situation.

At Goddard Shelter in Vermont, in September 2005, I pulled in early in the day when it started raining seriously. I didn't see the point in going farther and getting soaked to the skin, when I could proceed the next day and probably get in all the mileage I needed to do. The rain started blowing horizontally into the front of the shelter, which is located with a westward view. Since I didn't think to cover my pack until it was too late, some of my things got a bit wet. Fortunately, two brothers from Massachusetts appeared before noon and expressed doubts about continuing in the downpour. They were southbound, just a couple of days from finishing the Long Trail, which runs concurrent with the AT for some miles in Vermont. They also had some sort of tarp, which they rigged over the front of the shelter to keep the rain out. Believe me, I wouldn't have had a clue about that. Then, later in the afternoon, four thoroughly-soaked hikers came in to fill the other side of the shelter, and rigged another tarp to protect the sleeping space on that side from the driving rain. At dusk one more drowned rat appeared, and seemed very grateful that there was one space still vacant in our eight-person shelter.

We hikers needed each other that night. Without someone to rig a couple of tarps over the front of the shelter, there's no way any of us would have stayed dry through the night.

In August 2005 I found myself at Full Goose Shelter in Maine, southbound on the

Trail. I had started up the Mahoosuc Notch Trail earlier in the day, and had covered only a couple of miles of the AT by 6pm, when I arrived at Full Goose. I didn't even think about trying to make it another five miles to the next shelter, but pitched my tent on one of the tent platforms behind the shelter. Immediately I was surrounded by 17 Boy Scouts on a northbound expedition. They were a friendly bunch, so I found myself swapping stories for awhile after supper, telling them about my Eagle Scout son and various other things. They were headed through the Mahoosuc Notch the next day. I don't think any one of them had proper hiking boots. One fellow had duct-taped his heel blisters, which I didn't think was a good idea. But it's great to be young and strong like that.

Happiness was beating all 17 of them to the privy the next morning.

CHAPTER 8: FOOD, WILD AND DOMESTIC

I'm continually amazed at the diversity of food choices hikers make. Personally, I've made my choices according to what's available and weighs the least. When Andy and I were backpacking in the Smokies, I tried to pack a couple of pieces of fresh fruit for every trip, maybe a couple of oranges or a couple of apples, in addition to the instant mashed potatoes Andy loved. We'd boil water for supper and slice up a chunk of summer sausage in the mashed potatoes. We carried fig bars, cheese crackers, Slim Jims, and other traditional trail foods. For a hot breakfast it was hard to beat instant strawberry oatmeal or instant cheese grits, with hot chocolate on the side.

But my thinking about food has undergone some changes over the years. No longer do I try to carry fresh fruit on backpacking trips, because it weighs so much. For lunch I'll have a few pieces of dried fruit, beef jerky, and lightweight cheese crackers. Nuts are nutritious and filling. Breakfast items such as instant oatmeal, instant grits, and instant cream of wheat still give me a hot meal to start the day, and I've found ways to jazz up the instant mashed potatoes for supper. I always carry a few packets of instant soup. If I make a bowl of instant broccoli and cheese soup, then dump in the four cheese mashed potatoes, it adds a dimension to my supper. I can use instant chili mix, or several other things, to relieve the monotony.

When I packed for my week-long backpacking trip through the lower 58.5 miles of the 100 Mile Wilderness, in 2003, I managed to carry a week's worth of food and still keep the pack weight down below 30 pounds. This was crucial because I don't have the physical stamina to carry much more than that. In order to cut down on weight, I even decided to forego my usual hot chocolate for breakfast because the foil packets weighed too much. I packed tea bags instead. (Later, when I told this to Preacher and Pi, they asked if I had considered repackaging the hot chocolate mix into a Zip-loc bag instead. This would have eliminated the heavier foil packets, while still allowing me to have my hot chocolate. Duh!)

When I talk about hiking the Appalachian Trail, and mention that a thru-hike takes five months or so, people often ask, how can you carry that much food? They don't realize that the Trail crosses a road every few miles, and there are frequent opportunities to resupply. The only person I can think of who had a legitimate reason for carrying a month's worth of food was Eric Rudolph, the abortion clinic bomber who hid out from authorities in the mountains of North Carolina for a year or two.

Northbound backpackers often leave Springer Mountain in Georgia with 70 pounds on their backs. Most of them seem to pare it down to 35 pounds or so when they reach Neels Gap. One fellow told me he gave away about \$50 worth of food just so he wouldn't have to carry it any farther.

Many people fail to be realistic about the matter of food when they go backpacking. A man told me once that he had gone on a backpacking trip for several days in the Smokies with virtually no food at all. Believe it or not, his pack still weighed 70 pounds. Anyway, his purpose was to make this trip a religious retreat of sorts; he wanted to fast and pray in the wilderness.

In the first place, if I wanted to be alone in the wilderness, I wouldn't go to Mt. Leconte, where there are dozens of visitors any day of the year that the trails are passable. I could find dozens of spots far more remote. Be that as it may, there are five different trails that lead to the top of Mt. Leconte, and he picked one of the more difficult ones, the Rainbow Falls Trail. He got about halfway up the mountain and ran out of steam, probably owing to the fact that he had fasted for 24 hours before even starting his journey. He said he stopped and fell asleep for an hour or two. Upon awakening, he finally realized just how little energy he had left for the hike the rest of the way to the summit. As he was a devout Christian, it was his intention to take the Lord's Supper at some point during his trek, and he had brought a small bottle of wine and some communion wafers.

"Lord, whatever nourishment there is in this bread and wine, let me use it to get the rest of the way up the mountain," he prayed, and consumed it.

At the lodge at the summit of Mt. Leconte, he explained his plight to the staff, and they sold him some trail food. He spent that night in the hiker shelter near the summit of the mountain, with several other backpackers. But over the new few days he followed different trails to more remote campsites, and was able to find the solitude for contemplation that he had sought.

You can imagine a beginner doing something like this. We've all been beginners. However, this man had served a hitch in the Army and thought he knew all about backpacking. Go figure.

On my first backpacking trip with Andy, I brought a few frozen wieners, together with some hot dog buns in a crush-proof container. By the time we reached our campsite, the meat had thawed out, and we roasted hot dogs over a campfire. This would not be practical for a trip of several days, but it was a fun thing to do for an overnighter. The year Andy turned fifteen, he decided he wanted to have his birthday party on a backpacking trip, so we packed some hot dogs to cook at the campsite. One of his older brothers and two of his best friends actually went with us. As I recall, they played Dungeons and Dragons half the night in their tent.

You can find just about anything in the freeze-dried food department, including breakfast omelets, blueberry pancakes, and the like. Since I'm never out for more than three or four days at a time, I don't bother with very much freeze-dried food. It's expensive, although a restaurant meal in town will cost even more. But mainly, I know I'll

be back to my truck before I get terminally tired of mashed potatoes. I can eat instant cheese grits or instant oatmeal for a couple of mornings, knowing that when I get back to the trailhead, I can cook sausage, hashbrowns, and eggs on the tailgate. I can even make grilled cheese sandwiches in that little skillet over the one-burner stove.

In September 2005, I camped overnight in my truck at a trailhead in New Hampshire. It's illegal, but as long as I didn't pitch a tent, nobody was going to care. There was a privy, no problem there. When I awoke in the morning, I saw that someone had, indeed, pitched a tent in the parking area. He was stirring. So before I started breakfast on the tailgate, I went over to talk to the young man. "The patrol comes through here at 8:00," I said. "You might want to have that tent packed up and invisible by the time they come through, hate to have you get a citation."

"Oh, yeah, I'm already packing up," he said. "I hitched a ride to town yesterday to get supplies, and then got back here after dark and didn't know quite where to go, so this was my safest option."

I agreed. "Makes sense. Want some breakfast? I'm cooking on the tailgate."

"Thanks, but don't bother."

"I'm doing fresh eggs, hashbrowns and sausage," I told him.

His eyes lit up. "Really? Well, if it wouldn't be any trouble—"

"You be packing; I'll be cooking," I said, and walked back to my truck.

The morning patrol came through just as he was stuffing the last of his camping gear into the top of his pack, and they never gave him a second glance. They also failed to wonder why I was cooking breakfast on the tailgate. Now, I knew these guys were not enforcement rangers or anything of the sort; they just showed up in the morning to police the parking lot and pick up trash. But I knew, from my volunteer experience, how the system worked. If those guys witnessed an obvious violation of the camping rules, they could quickly radio in to headquarters for an enforcement ranger to come and issue a citation.

My new-found friend, from Florida, turned out to be a young southbound thru-hiker, who hoped to complete his hike by the end of December because he was scheduled to start college the first part of January.

By the time he had his pack loaded and cinched up, I was ready to serve. I had prepared my unique version of hashbrowns – I call it Irish stir-fry – with a couple of breakfast sausages and an egg to top off the whole pile. I described to him my plan to have a little soup-and-sandwich place of my own in retirement, somewhere close to the Trail.

He took a bite. "This is good!"

He took another bite. "This is REALLY good! This is better than the breakfast they serve at the huts, where they charge you \$40 a night "

Sitting on the tailgate, we talked a little, and I dug into my cooler to offer him a cold soda before proceeding down the Trail. "Well, if you can cook this great a meal on the tailgate on a little one-burner Coleman stove," he said, "I believe you can cook. Where are you going to have your soup and sandwich shop, anyway?"

Interestingly enough, a few days later I met this youngster again as I hiked through Vermont. Hurricane Katrina had just devastated the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, close to where I used to live in the 60's. "I thought you'd be farther down the Trail by now," I remarked.

He laughed. "Yeah, but my parents paid me a surprise visit in Hanover, New Hampshire. I guess they wanted to know I was doing all right. Every other year, they've done a vacation trip to the casino at Biloxi, Mississippi. But this year they came up here to meet me instead."

As everyone knows, the casino at Biloxi was totaled by the hurricane. And his parents, because of their love and concern for him, weren't there when it happened. Does this fall under the category of Trail Magic?

Anyway, I forget the young man's trail name, but I vividly recall the meeting.

On my 2005 odyssey, I knew I couldn't afford to eat restaurant meals. For supper many nights I'd simply open a can of beef stew, or chicken stew, or tamales, or something of the sort, that cost me roughly a dollar at a discount store. It was nutritious and filling, yet if I'd patronized a restaurant or fast-food establishment, I would have paid \$3-\$4 for something no better. In one of my later jobs in foodservice, we sold a large salad (which is a full meal) for over \$5. I'm not sure we actually made any money on it, either. By contrast, I could buy some salad mix and a few veggies at the supermarket, and put together a salad for lunch for \$1.50 or so.

Different people have different ideas about food on the Trail. In reading the legendary Earl Shaffer's account of his 1998 thru-hike, I was surprised to learn that he carried rolled oats to eat for breakfast, and soaked them overnight to make them edible. I wondered, what did he have against instant oatmeal? I certainly would never go to that much trouble. But on the other hand, I also prefer to wear socks. I guess it's all a matter of individual preference.

Because it's so impractical to try to carry fresh fruit on the Trail, I have an idea just how much hikers start craving it after a couple of weeks. When I lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, therefore, I would try to go up to Indian Gap in the Smokies a couple of days in April and meet and greet thru-hikers with fresh fruit. Maybe I would pack some sandwiches and soft drinks too. You haven't lived until you've seen a thru-hiker's face light up at the sight of an orange, as he says, "I've wanted an orange for the past five days. I've even had dreams about eating an orange." Bananas actually proved to be even more popular than oranges, and I've had the comment from more than one thru-hiker

that he or she had been craving a banana for the last 50 miles or so.

There is fresh fruit in season on the Trail if you know where to look for it. Around the Fourth of July the serviceberries get ripe on Spence Field and Russell Field in the Smokies. I've even feasted on them on the first of August at higher elevations. As far as I know, serviceberries grow quite a bit farther north along the Trail, and presumably one might find them ripe at a slightly later time of year.

When I started hiking sections of the Trail in northern Virginia and Maryland, I found that mulberries get ripe in July, and are delicious. Unfortunately, there is a mulberry tree in my back yard. A word of advice: don't ever park your vehicle under the mulberry tree.

I'll always remember Maine for wild raspberries in August and September. Coming over some of the summits in September, I found acres of ripe blueberries, and gorged on them in the Bigelow Range. Moxie Bald was a good source for wild blueberries too. Then down in Vermont, in September, I found blackberry patches with sweet, ripe berries in every open spot in the woods above 2000 feet. By the time I worked my way down to Massachusetts, around the first of October, the wild grapes were ripe and yummy.

Apples abound in old abandoned apple orchards in September and October. When I hiked through Virginia in the fall, I thoroughly enjoyed a great variety of ripe apples from old trees. It seems old apple orchards are everywhere along the Trail in Virginia – except on Apple Orchard Mountain. Go figure.

In April and May in the southern Appalachians, the wild onions we call ramps abound. I've always found them on Hump Mountain in April in abundance.

Then there are wild mushrooms. I've photographed and identified over 200 different species of mushrooms in the Smokies, and have eaten maybe 50 different varieties. There are a few species that are actually worth eating, and I know very well how to identify them. However, from talking to other hikers, I have come to realize that very few hikers know the first thing about fungi, and therefore should not attempt to consume what they think are edible mushrooms.

The small bright orange fungi known as chanterelles are a universal favorite among mushroom lovers. They grow singly or gregariously in soil, usually above streams, in midsummer. In talking with natives of Europe who fancy mushrooms, I always find that they are familiar with chanterelles, even if they don't know any other American variety. I once took an Italian instructor from the University of Tennessee on a mushroom hunt in the Smokies, and I believe we found a few. Then, after warning her that we were not very likely to find the prized *Boletus edulis*, I came upon a slope teeming with *Dentinum repandum*, a distinctive fungus with toothlike projections on the underside of the cap instead of the usual gills or pores. It is a mushroom with a firm texture, which

can be sliced up and cooked in just about any recipe. So we gathered a quantity of these, and she used them a couple of days later in spaghetti sauce. She told me later they were quite good, and the friends she had over for spaghetti really enjoyed it.

There is something important to know about chanterelles. No one should ever make this mistake, but I have met more than one person who had an experience with some large orange mushrooms that they thought were chanterelles. A friend told me some relatives of his had gathered a quantity of large orange mushrooms in the woods, and then called the public library for identification. Apparently they did not know, and the librarian did not know, that this was a recipe for disaster, as it is often impossible to identify a particular fungus without examining it firsthand. So this family, on the basis of someone's guesswork, concluded that they had a batch of chanterelles, and cooked and ate them. In reality their find was a cluster of *Omphalotus olearius*, popularly known as the Jack-O-Lantern. Need I add that the Jack-O-Lantern is somewhat poisonous. It is, in point of fact, hallucinogenic. It also makes one very sick, as attested by another friend of mine who had eaten some.

There should be no reason to confuse these two varieties. Chanterelles grow in soil, Jack-O-Lanterns on wood. Chanterelles are small to medium size; Jack-O-Lanterns are very large. Chanterelles grow singly or gregariously, the Jack-O-Lanterns in cespitose clusters; that is, many heads from a single base. Yet every year people eat Jack-O-Lanterns, thinking they are chanterelles, and get very sick from the experience. If you know all the characteristics to look for, you can safely identify edibles in the field. If you go by just one characteristic, such as color, you can go very far astray indeed.

Another example: while backpacking over Killington Peak in Vermont, in September 2003, I met and walked along for a couple of miles with a local Green Mountain Club member who was, like me, an amateur mycologist. Because of the season, we were encountering great numbers of *Armillariella mellea*, popularly known as the Honey Mushroom. I mentioned that I had gathered and eaten some of the young specimens.

My companion then told me that he had recently run across a backpacker with a handful of little brown mushrooms that he intended to cook and eat with his evening meal. When he looked at the young man's collection, his heart nearly stopped. Mixed in with some Honey Mushrooms were other, unrelated, little brown mushrooms, including some members of the deadly *Galerina* family. He advised the backpacker to have nothing to do with eating any wild mushrooms until he learned quite a lot more about them.

From what I've learned, it's good advice.

Backpacking near Pearisburg, Virginia one November, I camped under some walnut trees. Because it was the season for nuts to ripen, walnuts kept dropping from the trees and hitting my tent all night. I could have had a walnut feast, had I so desired.

Down in Georgia, it's quite possible a hiker could find pecans in some places during October and November.

A word about food safety: I love to cook, but I understand how easy it is to get sick from the bacteria that proliferate in food residue at room temperature. I can't refrigerate all my food and the cooking pot on the trail, so as to remove all habitat for bacteria. Therefore, I prefer to boil water – can't get in too much trouble doing that – and use prepackaged foods.

Yes, I crave fresh produce, but I can have that in my cooler in the back of the truck when I get in off the trail. I no longer eat from restaurant and supermarket salad bars, because of experiences I had working in a deli at a supermarket. Basically, I learned that employees in the deli did not routinely put all the food into clean containers at the start of the day, as I had been trained to do in a previous foodservice job. They kept the dressings in the same containers for weeks at a time, with the attendant buildup of residue. When I'd been there for a couple of weeks, we ran out of paper towels at the handwashing sink. I couldn't locate the key to open the dispenser and put in fresh paper towels, so I asked the deli manager about it. She informed me that she didn't have a clue as to where the key was. What did this mean? Apparently I was the only employee who washed my hands! If everybody else there had been washing hands, we'd have run out of paper towels every few days. The fact that the deli manager did not have a clue about the paper towel dispenser – and she'd been on the job for a couple of months – told me that we had not used up even one roll of paper towels in all that time. Let me tell you, it's impossible to stretch one roll of paper towels more than a few days in any foodservice establishment where employees are washing hands the way they're supposed to do. And not washing hands means that they touch one surface and transfer residue from another surface. If they've been slicing meat, and have meat residue on their hands, they will deposit this residue on whatever else they touch. It's a prime growth medium for bacteria.

Of course, I did eventually locate the key and change the roll, but that is not the point. The point is that standards for handwashing are very lax in this type of environment. In a supermarket the main emphasis is on selling groceries, and the peripheral functions, such as the floral department, video rentals, and delicatessen are subordinate to the main purpose of the store. Nobody pays close attention to food safety in the deli, as long as the manager somehow passes the twice-yearly health department inspection. Since the inspector comes early in the day, he doesn't see the employees who slice meat and don't clean the slicer between one meat and another. He doesn't see employees dishing up meals off the lunch bar and then not closing the doors to hold in the heat that keeps food up to safe temperatures.

Anyway, I know these things, and so I hesitate to eat from a salad bar. Instead, I will buy a package of salad mix at the supermarket and add a few grape tomatoes or

whatever, and have a nice fresh salad on the tailgate. I will carry grape tomatoes and baby carrots on a short backpacking trip, figuring they won't go bad the first day. This is how I get my veggies.

Look, I've worked in a number of foodservice establishments. Would it surprise you to learn that half the time employees slice up tomatoes for your sandwich without washing them first? Do you know how many different contaminants could be on those tomatoes? Maybe you take a slice of lemon for your iced tea; do you think anybody washes the lemons before slicing them?

In every place I've worked in foodservice, I've made salads. At a McDonald's where I worked briefly, I learned that the Cobb salads were supposed to be good for only four hours. Imagine my surprise when I saw an employee serving a Cobb salad that was three days old! I guess these employees think nobody can taste the difference. Let me tell you, once a tomato is sliced or chopped, it holds its fresh flavor for only a few hours. After those few hours, the tomato slices or dices taste like garbage. I worked briefly for a pizzeria that used chopped tomatoes as one of the toppings. When the diced tomatoes were not fresh, there was a distinct difference in taste. This is why cut tomatoes are always kept in a pan with a grate in the bottom. If the tomatoes are held up out of their own juices, they'll taste fresher longer. Marinating in their own juices, they sour very quickly.

I know all these things, and therefore I was very glad to have an ice chest in the back of my truck, where I could store (for a couple of days, anyway) fresh produce, meat and eggs. Okay, if you're a vegetarian or vegan, do your own thing. I'm just telling you what I worked out, for my own dietary needs. Basically, I was not restricted to nutritionally limited dried foods, with occasional gorging on expensive restaurant meals.

Oh, and I avoid most illnesses by taking Tahitian noni juice every day. It builds the immune system. I didn't miss a day's work for illness in 12 years. Yes, I've caught the occasional virus, but I don't get really sick; I throw it off immediately. The same virus that incapacitated my son Richard for nearly a week just made me lethargic for a day or so.

When I hiked sections of the Trail in New England for over a month in 2003, I wasn't able to take the noni, because it has to be refrigerated after opening. I couldn't keep it in my cooler for more than two days, and I was out for three or more days at a time on backpacking trips. On my way home to Tennessee, I started sniffing and sneezing a lot. The reason came to me after a bit: I hadn't been taking the noni, and my low-level allergies (to dust and other contaminants in the air) were kicking in again. Needless to say, as soon as I returned home to Knoxville, I bought some noni and resumed taking it. The respiratory problems disappeared.

In 2004 I had only a little over a week of vacation time, so I drove up to Connecticut and hiked the length of the Trail through that state. I wasn't gone long

enough to experience any distress from not taking noni for a week. But in 2005 I discovered that noni is now available in capsule form at health food stores. I can take the capsules anywhere, anytime, and continue to receive the benefits. So when I went on my 2005 odyssey, for over two months, I packed a two-month supply of noni capsules. I had no health problems during that time.

It costs me about \$30 a month to take noni juice. Do you know how much health insurance costs for someone my age? Hint: during my recent working years, my income amounted to just over \$1000 per month. Do you seriously think I could afford to spend \$600 per month on health insurance? Do you think my boss could afford to pick up the tab, and thus increase his labor cost by about 40%? If he had to do that, he'd do what every other employer in America has had to do: employ mostly part-time help, and thus dodge the bullet. Do you know how hard it is to find a full-time job? And do you know why?

The thing most people don't grasp about health insurance is that somebody has to pay for it. Why should I pay 50% of my income for health insurance when I have no chronic health problems? And if I could afford it, and if I had a major medical problem, the insurance company would immediately jack up my premiums to the point where I could not afford them. I have friends who have experienced this "if you use it, you'll lose it" situation. So I take noni juice, and I contribute to the healthcare system of America by not being sick.

In recent years, the laughably titled Affordable Health Care law has been enacted to complicate and exacerbate the situation. It's easy to say that 30 million people magically got access to healthcare. What's not so easy is explaining how to conjure half a million new healthcare professionals out of thin air. Remember, if you want to exercise your right to healthcare, you must first find someone to provide it. I imagine that when I finally come down with a serious illness, it will take me months to get an appointment with a specialist. And if the system extends medical benefits to 30 million people who can't pay for it, logically the ones who can afford it must make up the difference by paying more – and they are doing so. Recent studies show an average increase of 49% in health care premiums since the Affordable Health Care Act went into effect. If your income taxes went up by 49%, you'd holler like a stuck pig. But since this increase comes in the form of private insurance premiums, you probably are laying the blame on greedy insurance companies. Somehow losing money isn't in their business plan, and their greedy stockholders demand a return on their investment. Who would've guessed?

At my present age, I have Medicare. I'm quite sure the \$100 a month I pay for it doesn't cover much, but then, if I had to pay market rates for the mandated health insurance, it would probably take every bit of my \$672 per month Social Security benefit. That's what the government calls affordable. Of course, other people are paying higher

premiums to cover the difference. I feel somewhat ashamed of that, but I can't do anything about it. I haven't seen any major effort to reduce healthcare costs; the only question is who pays for increasingly expensive treatments and procedures. If the answer is "the government," then you know that wage earners will pay for it through increased taxes.

And apparently the American public would rather do that than implement the sensible diet and exercise principles that would prevent half of our chronic illnesses.

Well ... other people have different ideas about nutrition and health. These are mine.

CHAPTER 9: I ALMOST HAD A TRAIL DOG

A source of frustration for Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials and backpackers alike is the question of dogs on the Trail. The official guidebooks explain that pets are not allowed on trails in the Smokies, and that thru-hikers accompanied by dogs must kennel their pets while they hike through the Park. Most respect the edict. Given the number of hikers on trails in the Smokies, if everyone brought a dog, it would cause innumerable headaches for all concerned. But I've often seen day hikers and backpackers alike on the trails with dogs, some not even on a leash.

For instance, what do you do if your dog runs off and gets lost? Rangers are not going to waste their valuable time searching for a lost dog in their vast mountain area. On some trails hikers share the path with horse riders. An overenthusiastic dog, racing around a bend in the trail, might easily spook a horse and cause it to throw its rider, resulting in injury. Also, domestic animals sometimes carry certain diseases that could be detrimental to the wildlife in the Park. For all these reasons, dogs are not permitted on trails in the Smokies. But some people bring them anyway.

Being a dog lover, I do not mind dogs in general, but I am aware of the many problems they can cause on the trail. Backpacking the Mahoosuc Range in New Hampshire, I shared the shelter one night with half a dozen backpackers and one cute spaniel-looking dog. The dog and its owner had passed me on the Trail earlier in the day, and the creature seemed very friendly. However, once dark fell, this placid animal turned into a neurotic nuisance. Every time a mouse stirred out in the bushes, this dog would bark. I was exhausted and aching from a very hard day, but every time I started to drift off to sleep, I would be brought back to consciousness by a loud bark.

I slipped out of the shelter in the middle of the night to answer the call of nature, and somehow did not arouse the mutt. But the moment I started to come back in, the creature barked ferociously enough to awaken everybody in the shelter – exactly what I'd hoped to avoid.

(On the other hand, backpacking in Maine in 2003, I was kept awake half the night by the bellows of a love-stricken bull moose in mating season. The Trail is not always as tranquil as one might assume.)

I've also had some good experiences with dogs on the Trail. In September 2000 I backpacked the section of the AT between Dismal Creek and Pearisburg, Virginia. Bill Gauthier of the Holy Family Hostel shuttled me to the Dismal Creek trailhead to start this two-day trek, and I camped overnight near Sugar Run Road. Hiking out the second day, after passing the Doc's Knob Shelter, I met a young male black Labrador coming up the Trail. Upon seeing me, he turned around and started following me. I thought he might be

running ahead of his owner/hiker on the AT. But as time went on, I met no other hikers. This dog was on his own. As we hiked along together, it became obvious that he expected me to lead him out of the woods.

He was a well-mannered dog. When I stopped, he stopped. He followed at heel as well as any dog I've ever known, which was a help. A dog that cannot follow at heel will be forever entangling himself in one's legs, and running off to chase rabbits. This dog did none of those things. When I paused for lunch, he accepted some beef jerky. But when I offered him a cheese cracker, he didn't seem very interested. I concluded that he had not been lost very long, else he would have been much more hungry. Coming over Angels Rest, I was way short on water. The dog drank from puddles on the way. I fell once, and the dog was immediately on top of me, licking me, showing his sympathy for my plight. "Stop!" I cried. "I'm okay; stop licking me and let's go on."

In that whole day of hiking, the dog never barked, whined, growled, or vocalized otherwise. I thought it showed immense discipline.

When we crossed a blacktop road, with a couple of trailers nearby, the dog briefly ran off to sniff at other dogs. But I plunged back into the woods, and the dog followed me. We came out at Wade's Market in Pearisburg after 5pm. Since it had been a fairly warm day, I thought the dog should have more water, which I supplied from my cooler. When I went into the store to buy a few items for my drive home, the dog followed me. I explained to the staff that he wasn't my dog, that he had followed me down off the Trail. "There's a name and phone number on his collar," I said. "He's obviously a purebred black Lab, a valuable animal. I'm sure if you'll call the owner at the number listed, there will be a reward of some kind for his return."

With the aid of a length of yellow rope, I secured the dog behind the store and made sure he had more drinking water before I left for home.

Three weeks later I hiked down to Pearisburg from the other direction, and came out at Wade's Market again. The cashier remembered the dog episode, and told me that they had, indeed, called the owner, who lived in Christiansburg. It seems the dog was on his first hunting trial, in the hunting preserve atop Sugar Run Mountain, and had gotten lost from his owner. As smart and well-mannered as that dog was, I really wonder how he got lost. Anyway, she said the owner was really glad his dog had been found. If he hadn't had that collar with all the information, I would have taken him home with me.

Over the months and years that followed, I seriously considered acquiring a trail dog to go along on my AT excursions. I had enjoyed hiking with the black Lab. Since I had no human companions to share my hikes, on my unique schedule, maybe a dog would be a pleasant companion for my treks.

Five years later I had the opportunity to adopt my own trail dog. My middle son Richard, who was still living across town from me in Knoxville, Tennessee, had just

married a woman who owned four dogs, two male and two female. In fact, I went over to his house several times to feed and take care of the dogs while he and Amy were on their honeymoon.

Unfortunately, the alpha male of the pack got too aggressive one day with one of the other dogs. Richard unwisely tried to separate the two, with the result that the alpha male bit him. This set a dangerous precedent, especially since Amy was expecting their first child. Obviously Josh, a part yellow Lab, had to go. But softhearted Amy was attached to Josh, as she was to the other dogs, and she agonized over what to do with him. She rejected the idea of putting him up for adoption through the SPCA. She wanted to know he was going to a good home – preferably one where he could be the only dog.

In a phone conversation in late June 2005, Richard related this to me. I wondered aloud whether I could take Josh with me when I took off to hike the AT in New England in August. If he was the intelligent animal I thought him to be, I might have a strong, healthy young dog to accompany me.

After some consultation with Amy, Richard called back and asked if I was serious. This would provide a neat solution to his problem. And if I couldn't keep Josh after the Trail, could I at least see to it that he got a good home?

I replied that all this was a definite possibility, if I could spend some time with Josh and see how he reacted to a trail situation. I didn't want to haul him hundreds of miles from home, only to find he was not a suitable trail dog. So I came over and picked him up on my next day off from work, and took him on a four-mile loop hike on the House Mountain Trail, just a few miles from Knoxville. In the 1990's, friends of mine from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club built this trail, which is a wonderful place for urbanites from Knoxville to get away from it all. Since it's a short trip, I anticipated no difficulties.

Josh didn't really want to get into the back of my truck, but he understood what I wanted, and when I commanded, "Truck!" he paced back and forth a couple of times and leaped in. I let him get settled, closed the tailgate, and closed the topper door, leaving the side windows open for ventilation. He rode pretty quietly, poking his head up now and then to see what was going on when I stopped for an intersection. At the trailhead I let him out, on leash, and attached the doggie pack he would have to carry on the Trail. He didn't particularly like that, but I simply had to know whether he would be able to carry his own food and pup tent.

Josh walked the trail fairly well, with some prompting from me. He didn't know how to follow at heel, but I thought him teachable. When we met other hikers with other dogs, he seemed very happy to see them, and was very friendly. That could be important, I thought, because other hikers on the AT sometimes have dogs, and it could be an issue if he did not get along with other trail dogs.

Since I had the time the next day, I took him out again, same place, same hike, with a companion from the hiking club. Josh did better with switchbacks, and seemed cooperative. I gave him a Pup-eroni treat, which he loved.

Next day I worked till 10:30am, after which I came to pick up the dog and do a short walk around the walking track at the nearby middle school. Since it was a hot summer day, I didn't want to push for a lot of miles. Josh became very excited at the groups of other people walking the track, and again was very friendly. When we completed the one-mile loop, I said, "Truck!" He then tried to jump into someone else's van, which had the side doors open. Oops!

Anyway, by this time Josh perceived from these experiences exactly what his life was going to be like with me. The next time I showed up to get him, he ran under the house and hid. When I cornered him and got him on leash, he didn't seem eager to go hiking again. I didn't have him as firmly leashed as I thought, and he broke free, ran out the gate, and disappeared down the street with the other male dog. Now I was in big trouble with Amy if I didn't get them back. So I cruised the neighborhood, and found Josh and Bowie paying a call on some other dog at a house a couple of blocks away. The other dog was locked away inside the house and couldn't get out to come play with them, but the two miscreants were enthusiastically jumping up and down and barking at the front door anyway,

I parked the truck, let down the tailgate, and ran up and grabbed Josh's collar. I ran down the sidewalk with him and commanded, "Truck!"

I was sure he would jump up into the truck. Instead, he pulled away from me and went running off down the street. Of course Bowie followed.

I had to go explain the situation to Amy. She then climbed into her little white car, with me in the passenger seat, and we set off around the neighborhood looking. Amy knew their habits, and they knew her car, so she thought she could call them to her. As we went down the road half a mile away, I spotted a dog lying in the shade under a tree on somebody's big lawn. When we investigated, sure enough, we had found short-legged Bowie, who was doubtless not as well suited for running as long-legged Josh.

That night, as Josh still had not come home, Amy left the gate of the yard open in case he should need to get in. In the morning I called; still no Josh. So I went around the neighborhood and looked. As I drove around the street in back of the house, Josh appeared in the back driveway of a house just two doors down from Richard and Amy's house. Well! Maybe he was tired and hungry by now, and would welcome me. I let down the tailgate and called out, "Josh! Truck!" He turned around and walked off in the other direction. Needless to say, if he didn't want me to catch him, there was no way I could do so.

I assured Amy he did not look the worse for wear after a night out in stormy

weather; he had obviously found some place to shelter. She went out and tried to find him again, but Josh has not been seen again to this day. He made it absolutely clear to me that he did not want to be a trail dog – and a trail dog has to be willing to go the distance, day after day.

My feeling was that, if Josh was going to run off from me, I'd rather he did it back home in his own neighborhood, instead of waiting until we were 500 miles away in the deep woods.

I never made a serious effort to find a trail dog again, and maybe it's just as well.

CHAPTER 10: TRAIL MAGIC

Ubiquitous in thru-hiker lore is the principle of trail magic, the firm belief that whatever the hiker needs, the Trail will provide. It may be food, or it may be transportation, or various other things.

On one golden October morning in 1992, I set out from Fontana Dam in the Smokies up the AT toward Russell Field with several friends. At an overlook I paused with bank manager Tommy Small to admire the view. He turned to me and said, "I get to craving this about Wednesday of every work week."

I thought about it for a couple of beats. "I know what it is you crave, Tommy," I replied. "It's simplicity. Every decision we make out here today will be very simple. Don't you wish it could be that way every day at work?"

He agreed. That day, equipped with a painting kit, our group painted 12 miles of white blazes on the Trail, something that hadn't been done on that section in some years. We pulled into the Russell Field shelter around 4pm, whereupon I discovered that I had run out of food. Unfortunately, I am hypoglycemic. If I don't put something into the stomach every few hours, I can become faint and nauseated, whereupon I don't function very well. After I explained my plight, Tommy dug into his pack and handed me a packet of cheese and peanut butter crackers. It was just enough to get me five miles down the Russell Field Trail to the parking lot in Cades Cove where our transportation awaited.

Trail Magic is really very simple. All of us will have a need, out there, at one time or another. All of us will have the opportunity to meet someone else's unanticipated need.

(A few years ago, I vowed never to make my life more complicated than it needed to be. I also swore I would never make anyone else's life more complicated than it needed to be. I explained this vow of simplicity to my boss recently. After much pondering, he asked me one day, "How does this simplicity thing work anyway, Lou? What do you do with all the stuff you accumulate?"

"I reduce things to the lowest common denominator," I replied. "If I can live in a tent, or live in a truck, for a week at a time, I don't need a whole lot of stuff. And if I do happen to accumulate, well, there's always Goodwill."

We went on stocking the sandwich line for the lunch rush. Finally he said, "Do you mean I don't really need three lawn mowers?"

"Only if you have three lawns," I said.

Simplicity.

Others have helped me on the Trail when I was in need, but the beautiful thing is that I've had occasion to repay the favor. It's not as though I can ever repay that same person in that same way, but I do what we're meant to do in any community: pass it on to

the next in line.

Hiking in September 2003 in Maine, I did a 17-mile backpacking trip over Moxie Bald Mountain down to Shirley-Blanchard Road. It required spending the night at Moxie Bald Shelter, on the edge of Bald Mountain Pond. The only other occupant of the shelter was a thru-hiker who called himself Plato. Since I arrived before dark, we had the opportunity to chat a little before turning in for the night.

"Plato," I said, "You're 125 miles or so from Mt. Katahdin and the end of your thru-hike. What do you plan to do after the Trail?"

He replied, "I don't have a clue."

In the morning I photographed Bald Mountain Pond at sunrise, and later painted from those photographs one of the best paintings I've ever done. But also, Plato was out of food. He had 15 miles or so to hike toward Monson, Maine, where he could resupply before tackling the 100-Mile Wilderness.

Knowing how difficult it can be to function without fuel, I dug into my pack. "Here's an extra packet of cheese crackers that I'm not going to eat today," I said, "and here's a packet of beef sticks, some real nourishment, that I was saving for a special occasion. Have lunch on me."

Since I was just out for an overnight trip, I had way more food than I needed. I just had to make it another ten miles to my truck, whereupon I could drive to town for anything I didn't already have in the truckbed.

Once, on a volunteer trail crew out from Clingmans Dome in the Smokies, we paused at the Goshen Prong trail junction for a snack. I dug into my pack and discovered that I had no food at all. When my middle son Richard had hauled us up to the Clingmans Dome trailhead that morning, somehow my food container had fallen out into his trunk, and I had failed to notice it was missing.

Jodie Schneitman immediately rummaged around in her pack and found me an extra packet of cheese crackers, which I consumed a bit later in the day to stave off hypoglycemic shock.

In April 1992 I was with three friends on a 22-mile round-trip hike in the Smokies. Contrary to the weatherman's prediction, it was cold and foggy all day, never approaching the high of 60 that folks down in Knoxville were supposed to enjoy. When we started out from the trailhead, we were all thinking "clearing – and a high of 60." So, wanting to go as lightweight as possible, we all left our winter garments in the car.

At a trail junction an hour or two later, Tom Little read his pocket thermometer. It said 32 degrees. And where was that sunshine we were supposed to be seeing? We wore every stitch of clothing we had with us, and kept moving to generate body heat. Although I was wearing only a shirt and denim jacket, I stayed reasonably warm by donning my plastic rain poncho over everything. I would have been into hypothermia if

not for that poncho. When we reached the Tricorner Knob shelter, and stopped for lunch, Tom's thermometer read 27 degrees, so we didn't stop for long.

For some reason Tom felt compelled to recount the story of how he nearly froze to death in Europe during World War II, and Dot Spears had to reminisce about her experience with hypothermia on Mount Leconte a few years before. Never underestimate the power of suggestion. I couldn't stand it; I had to head back down the trail before I turned into an icicle. But I hadn't eaten enough, so I started getting hungry again two or three miles from the trailhead. Now I had a dilemma: I had more food in the pack, but did I want to stop long enough to eat, and possibly cool down into the danger zone? I was reluctant to stop. This, however, was a mistake. I started feeling faint, headachy, and a bit nauseated. Trail Magic that day came in the form of Bernie Baymiller handing me a mini-Snickers bar. I could eat it without stopping, and it boosted my blood sugar level enough for me to function for another couple of miles.

(When we all got back to Tom's van and cranked up the heater all the way, Dot called out from the back seat, "I know y'all won't believe this, but I actually started to put on sunscreen this morning.")

Food isn't the only need out there. Sometimes trail magic is transportation. Although I always try to make arrangements ahead of time, sometimes I can't easily find a ride when I need it. I've hiked a lot of sections of the Trail out and back, instead of being able to hike through the section and find my vehicle at the opposite end. Catching an unexpected ride definitely falls under the category of trail magic.

I went up to Bland, Virginia in April 2000 to do a sixteen-mile section of the Trail, and found the guy who had promised to give me a ride to the trailhead wasn't available to do so. To complete this section, I had to start at one end and have my vehicle parked at the other end. I couldn't hike the sixteen miles, then turn around and go back the same day. So I asked around town, because there's usually somebody who does these shuttles for hikers for a nominal fee. One fellow said go down this road here a half mile to the Bland County School Board building and ask for Doctor Frog.

I found Doctor Frog, explained my dilemma, and he immediately agreed to drive me up to the trailhead to start my hike. Poked his head in the office door and told his secretary to rearrange his appointments of the afternoon, went home to get his 4-wheel drive vehicle, and met me at the trailhead in Bland. He also picked up his 80-year-old mother to go along for the ride, and we had a very pleasant visit on the way. The trailhead at the top of Garden Mountain is very remote, and it took an hour to drive up there. He absolutely refused payment, so I gave him one of my paintings in appreciation. This man, the Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Bland County, took an afternoon out of his busy schedule just to help a fellow hiker.

On the first of August, 2005, I started in Knoxville, Tennessee and arrived at the

Grafton Notch trailhead in Maine early in the morning of August 2 to start my adventure of the year. After serious thunderstorms the night before, the day dawned clear and fairly cool. I had slept for a few hours after arriving the night before, and felt rested. As I got up early and started breakfast on the tailgate, another hiker emerged from a parked vehicle. It was a young fellow called 2x4, with his part-Shepherd Ki-Yo. (Hope I'm spelling that right!) They had thru-hiked the Trail the year before, and 2x4 was returning to do a few miles on a vacation trip. I cooked breakfast on the tailgate with my little Coleman stove, and offered him some, which he declined. We talked a bit about our hiking plans.

The upshot of it was, 2x4 offered to shuttle me – at no fee – to a trailhead near Andover to start my first day's hike. He planned to hike a side trail loop in the area, and didn't mind at all carrying me along to East B Road to do my day hike down to Grafton Notch. In fact, at some midpoint on my day hike, I re-met 2x4, who was hiking his loop in the opposite direction.

This was a wonderfully friendly thing for a fellow hiker to do for me. (Later in the day, as I crawled over Bald Pate Mountain with the soles of my boots flapping, I wasn't so sure it was a good idea, but I get myself into these things, after all.)

In September 2000 I day-hiked the difficult section of the Trail in Virginia over the Dragon's Tooth, starting at the Stony Creek trailhead around 10am. It's just 7 miles or so over to Highway 624, so I figured there was plenty of time to hike both ways. Oops! This rough section took me six hours to hike, instead of the four I had planned. So, when I came out at Highway 624 around 4pm, I wasn't enthusiastic about returning by the same route and hiking a few miles of unfamiliar trail after dark. I noted there were roads I could walk for six miles, and get back to my truck before dark. Roadwalking, I'd make 2-1/2 miles per hour or so. But it was very hot for that time of year, and since I'd started the day in a drizzle, I had neglected to bring insect spray, sunscreen, or a cap to cover my head.

I walked over to the country store a little ways from the trailhead, on my way back to Trout Creek. I explained my situation and asked if there was anyone in the area who did hiker shuttles. The folks at the store didn't know anybody, so after chugging a giant Diet Dr. Pepper, I was prepared to walk the rest of the way back to my vehicle.

A fellow shopping in the store turned to me. "Is that your green Jeep parked at the Trout Creek trailhead?"

How'd he know that? "Uh, yeah, that's me."

"Well, I live about 50 yards from the trailhead," he explained. "I saw your vehicle parked there this morning. If you want a ride back, I'm headed home from here; I'll be glad to take you."

On the way he told me of an incident a couple of years before, where he rescued a middle-aged hiker who was having a heart attack on the Trail.

It's wonderful to have Trail neighbors like that.

A couple of weeks later, I decided to do an overnight backpacking trip in Virginia between Cloverdale and Catawba, slightly south of Roanoke. Although I did have the name and phone number of a contact person who was supposedly available to shuttle hikers, this was not as straightforward as it seems. Directions were to call him after 2pm. Trouble was, five days a week I was working afternoons and evenings. I didn't have any time to call when I could reach him, unless I wanted to book a trip a week in advance. Given the weather possibilities, I didn't like that idea.

I drove up anyway, hoping I could catch somebody to do a shuttle from Cloverdale over to Catawba. However, I couldn't find anyone, and simply needed to get walking if I wanted to reach my campsite before dark. I parked and began my hike, thinking that I probably could find a ride at the other end of the 19.6-mile section. As I came down off McAfee Knob, it was a hot day, with temperatures in the 80's, and I had very little water left. I wasn't enthusiastic about walking another mile to the Catawba Store. About a mile or two from the trailhead, I fell in with a young man who was also headed down to the Catawba Valley trailhead. I asked if he could give me a ride as far as the store, and he agreed.

I inquired at the register whether there was someone I could call for a shuttle ride back to Cloverdale.

The lady behind the counter said, "My husband usually does that, but he's not here today."

I wondered out loud whether I should call a cab out of Roanoke.

A fellow who happened to be shopping in the store overheard the conversation and said, "Say, if you need a ride over to the trailhead at Cloverdale, I'd take you for \$20."

I readily agreed, and Chuck Crowell and his wife turned out to be great companions on the drive. The wife worked at the local post office, and was just getting off from work; he made a living doing carpentry and such.

Up in Central Virginia, in May 2002, I backpacked from Petites Gap to the Punchbowl crossing of the Blue Ridge Parkway. I had called trail angel Ed Williams beforehand to arrange a shuttle. Since he had a doctor's appointment on Monday, he wasn't available to pick me up at Punchbowl and deposit me at Petites Gap to start my hike. However, we determined that if I parked at Petites Gap and started walking, he could pick me up the following day at Punchbowl and carry me back to my truck. How long would it take me to do that second day, over difficult terrain? I asked him to meet me at 3:30 in the afternoon, which allowed me to arrive on time even if I hiked only one mile per hour. I repeated this twice: 3:30.

Only, I suppose Ed was a bit hard of hearing. I thought he understood me, but he didn't. It happens. When I came out of the woods the second day, around 3:15, rain was

starting. Ed wasn't there, nor did he show up at 3:30. This was not a good situation. Around 3:45 I considered that I might just have to hitchhike to get back to my truck, and I would have to do it in the rain.

Right about then a van pulled into the parking area. A sign on the side of the van said "TRAIL ANGEL." It was Ed.

"Hey, where were you?" he complained. "I was here at 1:30 waiting for you."

I thanked him profusely for coming back a second time to look for me, and gave him some extra money for his trouble. Not everybody would have been concerned enough to return and look for me later.

Coming north out of Shenandoah National Park in October of that same year on a day hike, I expected someone to be at the trailhead at Highway 522 outside Front Royal, Virginia. I had arranged for a pickup at 12:30. As it happened, the Trail had been rerouted since the guidebook was published, and many of the landmarks listed in the book did not tally with reality. For once, the relocation actually made the section about a mile shorter. I was supposed to cross VA 601, then 602, then Highway 522. After I crossed the first gravel road, which I assumed to be 601, the next road crossing was a much bigger paved road. Was this 602 or 522? I couldn't see any highway signs to give me a clue. It was just a few minutes after 12:30. If this was the parking area at 522, then why wasn't my ride there? So I assumed this was VA 602, and pushed on, in a drizzle that steadily increased as I walked. After a mile or two, I concluded that the big paved road probably was 522 after all, but I was nowhere in sight of it at that point.

As it turned out, I was very close to a gravel drive that led to a few houses just down the mountainside. An elderly man was out walking his dog, so I stopped and asked directions. He confirmed that the road I'd crossed was, indeed, 522. He also let me use his telephone to try to call my shuttler. I didn't get an answer, and the fellow didn't have an answering machine for me to leave a message. So there I was, pretty much out in the middle of nowhere, in the rain, with my truck parked nine or ten miles away, up in Shenandoah. The kindly old man gave me a ride down to the 522 trailhead, where there was nobody at all. Then he drove me on into Front Royal, where I knew I could hire a cab to take me back to my truck.

More than one person helped me that day. When we got into Front Royal, I got out at the Visitors Center, figuring I could call a cab from there. The folks at the Visitors Center were very gracious and kind to someone who wandered in out of the rain, dirty, bedraggled, and wet, carrying a backpack. We chatted for about half an hour while I waited for my taxi. By the time it arrived, fog was setting in, so I was very glad to have someone else driving me. The Shenandoah rangers close the parkway, I believe, when fog becomes too dense. We must have been the last vehicle they allowed in the gate that day. As the fare was only \$16 or so, I handed the driver a twenty and thanked him for saving

me a very long walk indeed.

This occurred on the last Monday of October. I wonder to this day if my intended shuttle driver had forgotten about going off Daylight Savings Time on Sunday, and was at the trailhead an hour early as a result. It's about the only thing that makes sense.

Trail magic can be in the people you meet, as well as anything else.

During my 17 years in Knoxville, Tennessee, I was a member and for a couple of years an officer in the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, which maintains 100 miles of the Appalachian Trail. I also served as an Adopt-a-Trail volunteer patroller in the park for a few years, together with Andy. It got so that I could hardly hike anywhere in the Smokies without meeting somebody I knew. Then, on a backpacking trip on the AT in Virginia in 1998, a couple of hundred miles from home, I met a group of hikers at a trail intersection and stopped to ask a couple of questions. When I introduced myself as Louisiana Lou, one of the ladies piped up, "Oh, I've heard of you."

Next day, miles from civilization, I met a young backpacker on the Trail and introduced myself. "Oh," he said, "I know who you are. You founded the 900 Miler Association. I'm hiking all the trails in the Smokies so I can join."

All right. But picture this: in 2002 I was taking a couple of weeks to hike on the AT up north. It rained for a few days and I found myself at Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania. I hired a taxi up to Fox Gap, to the south, to get on the Trail and hike back to Delaware Water Gap, thus getting in 7-1/2 more miles of the Trail. I got out of the cab with my day pack and looked across the road as two hikers emerged from the woods. They looked at me, looked at one another, and called out in unison, "Louisiana Lou, is that you?"

A thousand miles from home, in a remote location, I had run into two of my best friends from the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, Jenny Whited and Mary Chollman. Unbeknownst to me, they had come up to hike some sections of the Trail in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, with the help of fellow hiker and driver Keith Mertz. So I joined them in hiking for the next three days, getting in an unexpected 42 miles of the Trail in New Jersey without having to pay for a shuttle.

I reaped some unexpected rewards from playing trail angel one day in April 2003 at Indian Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I took a sack of oranges and bananas, along with some soft drinks and sandwiches, and parked up at the trailhead. After feeding 14 hungry thru-hikers that day, I gave one of them a ride down to Gatlinburg so he could spend a night at a motel there. He and I hit it off great, and he insisted on buying me lunch in return.

It turned out we were both long-divorced, we both had grown children, and he was just one year older than I was, retired from a job with the Florida Fish and Game Commission. We had so much in common it was uncanny. Yet, although I gave him my

address and phone number, I had no idea whether I'd ever see him again.

But this is the Appalachian Trail, remember. Now fast-forward four months and 2000 miles of the Trail. In August of that year I went up to Maine to hike nearly 60 miles of the 100-Mile Wilderness, from Jo-Mary Road down to the town of Monson. My first day on the Trail, I stopped to rest about 4:00. I glanced up, as two thru-hikers came into sight around a bend. Yes.

"Ranger Rick!" I called out.

He paused in mid-stride. "How'd you know that?"

"Because I'm Louisiana Lou."

He looked at me more closely then. "Gosh, you sure are. Do you know, I spent the night at the Kincora Hostel in Tennessee, and your painting of Jane Bald was right above my bunk."

He did send me a Christmas card, with a picture of his triumph atop Mount Katahdin. I wrote back with a brief message of congratulation, and added that if he ever came thru the Smokies, he could look me up.

Well, he never did, but it certainly was an interesting possibility.

I reaped other unexpected rewards from my day of feeding thru-hikers in the Smokies. As I hiked south through the 100-Mile Wilderness toward Monson, my third day on the Trail, I somehow lost my pack cover coming over Gulf Hagas Mountain. I did not realize my loss until I had gone another mile or so. Unfortunately, I had pushed myself very hard to do two 11-mile days in a row, and I was extremely tired that third day. I just could not force myself to climb all the way back up Gulf Hagas Mountain to look for the pack cover. Yet I knew it was going to rain that night, and I would need to keep my pack dry.

As I stopped to rest for the tenth time in a mile, a northbound hiker came into view. "Say, could you do me a favor?" I asked. "If you meet anybody coming along behind me, and if they found a blue pack cover, would you tell them Louisiana Lou needs it? Anybody on the Trail will catch up to me, I'm moving so slowly."

The northbound thru-hiker smiled. "Louisiana Lou! You gave me some fruit and a sandwich back in the Smokies, I'm Footslogger, do you remember me? Sure, I'll alert whomever I meet."

It was maybe half an hour later that a fellow walked up behind me and said, "Are you Louisiana Lou?"

I turned around. He was holding my pack cover in his hand. Believe me, I was glad to have a dry pack with dry contents the next morning after a good overnight rain.

Of those 14 hikers, three sent me pictures from the summit of Mt. Katahdin. Three years later, I planned to do a painting of the scene at the top of Katahdin, complete with triumphant thru-hiker. As it happened, I had two that were usable as models. Ranger

Rick's picture showed the summit and the background scenery, which I needed. Unfortunately, the focus was far enough away that I couldn't read a word of the lettering on the sign. But wait! The father-daughter team of Jelly Bean and Barking Spider had sent me a picture that showed their smiling faces above the sign, and very little else. Every word on the sign was crystal clear.

If you view my art exhibit in the Appalachian Trail Museum, you'll see the painting I did from those two pictures. I needed both views in order to do it, because I will never have the chance to take my own picture at the summit.

The fellow in the painting – that's Ranger Rick.

CHAPTER 11: LEVELS OF DISCOMFORT

One basic fact to keep in mind about hiking is that there are different levels of discomfort involved. There is no other honest way to say it.

Hiking the Trail, there will always be rainy days, steep climbs, and occasional sore muscles. There will always be hazards, which sometimes take one unaware. When I plan my hiking trips, I necessarily decide how much I want to endure for the sake of a few more miles on the Trail. The elevation profile gives some clue as to the difficulty of the terrain, of course, but it doesn't tell me everything. Some of the rocky sections in Pennsylvania don't look difficult on the map, but a hiker will be slowed down by the uneven tread and the need to rock hop. There are also stream crossings, which are usually described in the guidebook enough for a hiker to know what to expect.

Stream crossings are one reason why I always try to have a spare pair of socks in the pack. On some hikes in the Smokies, when I knew in advance that there would be multiple creek crossings, I would carry an old pair of tennis shoes for wading. Several times my friends and I hiked Eagle Creek, which has 18 unbridged crossings. After the first, we would don the creek shoes, and would not bother to put the boots back on until we reached the last one. Taking off the boots and putting them back on eighteen times is simply a bit much. On the other hand, crossing barefoot can lead to bruised feet, slipping on slick rocks, or even cut feet. The tennis shoes protect against all of these things. Sure, there will be dry seasons where such precautions are unnecessary. One year I hiked the length of Eagle Creek with two friends and rock-hopped all the crossings with dry feet. But two weeks later I hiked it with a different group, and had to wade.

On a trip to the Big South Fork to finish the John Muir Trail, in February 2002, I was ill prepared for what I encountered. I thought it would be an easy hike, a ten-mile round trip up to the end of the trail and back, so I let the atmosphere warm up a bit before I headed into the woods at 11am. Now, I had read the guidebook, mind you. I knew the trail would ford Rock Creek. But somehow I had overlooked the part where it said "27 times." True, a few of those crossings were shallow enough to wade or rock-hop, but mostly I had the choice of going barefoot or getting the feet soaked. Those nice waterproof boots with the Gore-Tex lining would keep out water as long as I didn't wade too deep, but when the water poured in from above, it had no way to run out either. Since I hadn't brought a pair of creek shoes, I had to endure the misery of three pounds of water in the boots for a good portion of the hike. About every four or five creek crossings, I would stop and pour the water out. I knew that if I tried to wade barefoot, taking off the boots and putting them back on at each crossing, it would take me several extra hours to do this 54 times. And my feet would be vulnerable to injury. Had I thought to bring the tennis shoes, the water would have gone in and out freely, which would have been much

more comfortable.

What with all the rock hopping and stream crossings, I felt quite beat-up at the end of this supposedly simple ten-mile hike. It happens.

When I hiked the Laurel Fork trail in Big South Fork, later that month, I simply brought along a pair of thick wool socks to wear inside the tennis shoes. I figured the water would be cold, although atmospheric temperatures were up around 50 degrees at the high point of the day. The wool socks kept my feet warm enough in spite of being wet, and I experienced no real discomfort on that trip.

I don't hike in heavy downpours by choice, but I know it's going to rain sometimes out there. I can plan a trip with the weatherman's assurance that the chances of rain are nil, yet when I get out on the trail, I'd better be prepared for the worst. Andy and I backpacked the 20+ mile Forney Creek and Forney Ridge loop in the Smokies one weekend in October 1994. The weatherman mentioned a "chance of a few sprinkles." Our first day was okay, but when we awoke the second morning and started packing the gear for our trek back up to Clingmans Dome, a fine drizzle commenced. By the time we'd been on the trail for an hour, that light drizzle had turned into steady rain. I was just thankful that we had managed to do the four lower creek crossings before the waters rose. Forney Creek can rise two feet in two hours when it's raining, and that was a hard rain. In fact, we met a man and his son who were headed downstream on a backpacking trip to stay at a lower campsite. I strongly advised them to stop at a campsite above those dangerous stream crossings, rather than to continue to their designated campsite lower down. I couldn't imagine a ranger writing them a citation for being at the wrong campsite under those conditions.

Water is one of the elements that can make a backpacking trip miserable, in many different ways. Sometimes it's water from above, in the form of precipitation; sometimes it's water from a deep stream we have to cross. In either case, we have to deal with it. I've been wet a lot of times, and I've had cramps in my freezing feet on icy stream crossings. An interesting fact is, your feet can't actually freeze as long as you are walking. It keeps the blood circulating.

In my 2005 rambles in Maine and New Hampshire, I began to experience serious arthritic pain in my right hip, and the right knee wasn't entirely happy either. Evidently the strenuous climbing in the Mahoosuc Range was more than my aging body could easily tolerate. Since then, I've hiked as much as 19 miles on the Trail in one day, with no real pain. Yet I can suffer after an eight-or-nine-mile day, if there is a lot of steep climbing involved. I never know exactly how much will be too much.

Backpacking an easy few miles on the Kentucky Trail in November 2000, I was beset by shooting pains in the left knee after five miles of easy walking. It didn't feel much better in the morning, either, so I just returned to the trailhead at Blue Heron and

didn't do the few more miles I had planned for the second day. Arthritis is that way; I never know which joint will start hurting or for what reason. The left knee never really troubled me again until 2010, and I have no explanation for that painful episode. More than once I've basically set up my tent one-handed because of arthritic pain in the right wrist, or tendonitis in the left hand.

I've suffered my share of needless pain, which I could have avoided by simple preparation. For instance, on one trail maintaining trip, I got out of the van at Newfound Gap in the Smokies and discovered I'd left my hiking boots in my own vehicle, in the parking lot back in Knoxville, an hour away. The plastic bag I thought contained the boots turned out to contain something else instead, I forget what. I couldn't go back for anything; we needed to get on the trail right then in order to complete our 20-mile trek and still get in off the trail before dark. So I walked the 20 miles in my SAS loafers. By the time we came out of the woods that evening, my right foot felt as though a horse had stepped on it. But I made it all the way, and recovered later.

You'd think I would never again forget my boots, after that experience, but it has happened more than once since. Some time in 2003, I loaned my truck to a friend who needed to haul something. My boots were in the back of the truck. Only, the next time I went on a hike, those boots were nowhere to be found. Pretty obviously, the friend neglected to close the tailgate at some point, and the boots fell out, don't ask me where. I did the next hike in my street shoes, needless to say.

Probably the most notable instance of forgetfulness occurred one day in 1993, when I went to the Smokies to do a 16-mile loop hike with Bernie Baymiller and Dot Spears. About halfway to the trailhead, Bernie slapped his forehead. "Oops! I forgot to pack any water. Let's swing into the next convenience store so I can buy some bottled water to carry along."

When we got to the trailhead, I discovered I'd gone off and left my hiking boots again. So I walked the 16 miles in my street shoes, with the attendant discomfort. Dot razzed us about being forgetful old farts.

I had just gotten home when the phone rang. It was Dot.

"Well, I forgot something after all," she said. "I found out on the way home. A cop stopped me for a traffic violation, and I discovered I had forgotten my drivers license."

These things happen.

Sometimes the smallest thing can cause discomfort. In April 2003 I did an overnight backpacking trip in central Virginia, between Salt Log Gap and the Punchbowl crossing of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a distance of 18.7 miles. I parked at the Punchbowl end; trail angel Ed Williams picked me up and shuttled me over to Salt Log Gap to start my hike at 9:30 that first morning. At that point I was hiking with only a water bottle and lunch, basically, because my overnight pack was stashed in the bushes down near

Highway 60, about eight miles away. I didn't see any need to carry all that stuff any farther than I had to. After slackpacking the first eight miles, I had no trouble carrying the big pack another 3.2 miles to a spot where I camped for the night.

The kicker was, I started experiencing pain in the third toe of my right foot after the first few miles. I couldn't figure out why, because I was wearing the same socks and boots I always wear, and I wasn't even under extra pressure from carrying the full pack. By the time I got down to Highway 60, I just had to stop and take off the right boot and look at the situation. The toe was actually bleeding by this time, and why? It dawned on me that I'd forgotten to clip my toenails before starting the trip.

After clipping the toenails on the spot, with nail clippers that I always carry in my camera bag, I proceeded with the rest of the hike as planned. Some Neosporin and a Band-Aid protected the injured member from further abuse. How could I be so clueless after hiking thousands of miles? I don't know. Maybe nobody ever gets to the point of knowing everything.

I suffered a serious setback in July 1998. On a hike on the AT down to Damascus, Virginia with Andy, I had tied the laces too tight on my right boot. I felt some discomfort, but it was only two more miles down to Damascus, so I couldn't be bothered with retying the boot. By the time I reached the trailhead, the damage had already been done. I had seriously irritated a nerve in my right foot. The next time I laced up the boots to go hiking, I suffered pain after a couple of miles. This condition persisted for some months.

Meanwhile, my friends Anna Marie Stefanick and Mary Chollman had adopted a trail in the Smokies. The way that happened was, the two of them were hiking the Sweat Heifer Trail at some point in time in pursuit of their 900-Miler credentials. They got lost because of walking off the end of an unmarked switchback in the middle, and had extreme difficulty finding their way back to the trail. Anna Marie called me in indignation after this episode. "Somebody needs to do some maintenance on this trail!"

I agreed. "You are so right. Somebody does. And when do you intend to start?"

"Uh—"

"Let me give you the telephone number of the volunteer coordinator," I said. "She'll be glad to hear from you."

So Anna Marie and Mary became Adopt-a-Trail volunteers. I took Mary on her first volunteer patrol, in May 1996, along with friend Sammy Gregory from the Smoky Mountain Hiking Club. Anna Marie and Mary found some other volunteers and built up a sizable trail crew over the next couple of years. The "Moo Crew" included such notables as architect Philip Royer, who went on to become president of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, and contributed an incredible amount of time and expertise to improving the hiker shelters on the Appalachian Trail in the Smokies. The hiking club honored him with the Marshall Wilson Presidential Award in 2000.

I still have a "Moo Crew" T-shirt, by the way. There was a whole series of cow jokes that went with the Sweat Heifer theme. Like, what do you tell around the campfire on a backpacking trip? Cow tails. How do you feel on a hike when you've forgotten your raingear? Udderly ridiculous. Or, what's *deja mu*? That's the feeling you get when you've heard all this bull before. My own contribution was that most trail crews have to fight the blackberry briars, but we just needed to watch for the bovines.

Anyway, I went on a trail maintaining trip with them in fall 1998, after injuring my foot earlier in the year on the Damascus hike. Our trek that day was only about six miles, but right in the middle of it my right foot started hurting so badly that I just had to stop and take off the boot. The injured nerve could not stand any kind of pressure. So I loaded the right boot into my backpack and proceeded down the trail with one booted foot and one sock-clad foot. I don't suppose that would have been too bad, but this was October. I never knew there were so many oak trees on the Sweat Heifer Trail. Do you know what it's like to step over three miles of acorns in sock feet?

And still we hike.

On July 29, 1994 I was changing the blade on the paper cutter in my printing shop. Somehow the sharp blade fell off the table and sliced into my right heel on its way down. Naturally, I was thankful it didn't sever the Achilles tendon, but still there was a sizable wound and lots of blood. I disinfected and bandaged the wound.

I was scheduled to lead a hike with the hiking club the next day, a complicated affair with three groups of hikers doing three different hikes and reuniting at the end of the day at the Hazel Creek trailhead to ride the boat back to Fontana Boat Dock. Basically, Ken Jones drove a group of diehards up to Clingmans Dome at the crack of dawn and let them out to hike down the length of Hazel Creek. He then drove around by way of Bryson City, North Carolina, to meet the rest of the group at the boat dock and ride across the lake with us to the Hazel Creek trailhead.

Since I was in no shape to lead the 15-1/2 mile hike up to Bone Valley and back, I deputized Dot Spears to lead that group. I then invited the other eight participants to explore the old cemetery, view the restored Proctor House, and prowl around the old brick kiln a little ways up the creek. A few hikers went a little farther up the trail and turned around to come back when they felt like it. Since the Hazel Creek Trail is a wide old roadbed in the lower few miles, there was no chance anyone could get lost. I "led" the more laid-back group, had lunch up at the cemetery, hunted mushrooms, and generally puttered around for about four miles of easy walking. A couple of people opted to take a swim in the lake while waiting for the boat.

Everybody apparently had a good time. The distance hikers, who walked over 20 miles down from Clingmans Dome, all arrived at the pickup site in time for the boat. So

did the vigorous hikers who visited Bone Valley. As for me, my heel was still bleeding a little, but not seriously. By Monday morning, when it occurred to me that I should have had stitches, the darn thing was already knitting together pretty well and had stopped bleeding, so I never saw a doctor with it. And I led my hike, right on schedule.

In July 2002 I broke a toe on my right foot, stumbling around in the dark in my own home. It was swollen, purple and painful the next day. Yet, five days later, I led the trail crew and hiked six miles in my hiking boots.

On a memorable 1995 hike on the Lakeshore Trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, several of us endured avoidable discomfort. Andy and I and eight other hikers started at the Hazel Creek trailhead, after taking a boat ride across Fontana Lake, and walked the 25-1/2 miles to the other end at Bryson City, North Carolina. Incidentally, three members of the party held doctorate degrees, and of course all the PhD's got lost at some point. But that was a minor thing; they all discovered the error of their ways, and got back on the trail. My son Richard drove around to Bryson City to pick up several of the hikers who finished the hike by 6pm, including his brother Andy. He carried them back to the Fontana boat dock, where retired electrical engineer George Gorker had parked his big old Ford, ready to haul everybody except Andy back to civilization.

By this time dusk was setting in, and everybody at the boat dock had gone home for the night. But wait! George's car wouldn't start. Why? He'd left the headlights on all day, and the battery was dead.

Everybody was most grateful for Richard's jumper cables.

But there's more to the story of that legendary hike. As for me and two of my slowpoke friends, we came out of the woods after dark, about 8:45. Just before reaching the Bryson City trailhead, the trail passes through a long tunnel, which was originally supposed to be part of a road that never got built, back in 1943. Anna Marie Stefanick balked at the sight of the tunnel looming up before her in the dark. Who knew she had tunnelphobia? It had never crossed my mind to ask, I mean, how often do these things occur in the course of a simple hike?

But here we were, after dark, with the March night growing chilly and Anna Marie trying to deal with her irrational fears. "Can we go around it? Can we climb over it?" she suggested.

Actually, there's a loop trail called the Goldmine Loop that does bypass the Tunnel. I've hiked it many times on shorter day hikes with friends. But after 25-1/2 miles of walking, who wants to turn around and do two or three more? So I said, "No, we can't just walk around it or over it. You need to go through it, or do you want to go back the way we came?"

Of course she didn't want to hike 25 miles back to the trailhead on Hazel Creek. But still she hesitated, unwilling to face her subconscious fears.

I got another idea. "Hey, Anna Marie, it's already dark. Guess what! It's no darker inside the tunnel than it is outside Come on!"

She didn't budge.

Then I played my trump card. "Anna Marie! Your husband Frank is waiting on the other side of the Tunnel to pick us up. Think Frank!"

So I think Carolyn Ebel and I each grasped one of Anna Marie's hands and propelled her through the Tunnel; that's the only way we could possibly have gotten her to the other end. We walked the last few yards to the trailhead packing lot, and guess what! There was no Frank. Unbeknownst to us, he had gotten lost in Bryson City and couldn't readily find anyone to give him directions to The Tunnel. It seems everybody in Bryson City is still mad about the road not being built in 1943.

(Remind me to retire in Bryson City. People there must live forever. Or hold grudges forever. Hmm.)

Anna Marie had an ace in the hole. "Frank gave me this neat cellular phone to carry on hikes," she said. "I'll just call him up and find out where he is."

She dialed up. Her phone gave her a nice little message to the effect of "No service in this area. Sorry."

We were in the midst of the Smoky Mountains, with all the attendant signal interference. Considering that I can't even dial up the Verizon nationwide calling network in Hagerstown, Maryland, 60 miles from our nation's capital – what were the odds of making a call from remote Bryson City, North Carolina?

Anna Marie seemed a bit annoyed, however. Starting out on a 25-mile day hike, nobody carries more than is necessary, knowing that every extra pound in the pack will cost energy later in the day. "You mean I carried this phone 25 miles and it doesn't even work?" she cried out.

But we had no clue as to the whereabouts of Frank, or anything else. On that March night, temperatures were already dipping down into the 40's, and we three stragglers were shivering, not having brought any extra clothing to weigh us down on our long trek. "Come on," I said, "we've got to keep walking to stay warm, or we'll really be in trouble. It's only another five miles to Bryson City, where we surely can find any help we need."

Actually, it's more like 12 miles, but I didn't know that, and wouldn't have told the others if I had known. We simply had to get walking again to maintain body heat, so we started up the road toward Bryson City. After a mile and a half, we met Frank, who had been delayed by getting lost in Bryson City. Bear in mind, we had walked 27 miles that day and were pretty well exhausted. What did Frank say? He got out of the car, howled at the moon, and said, "Don't ever ask me to do this again!"

All we did was to walk 27 miles. Frank was aggrieved at having to come pick us

up. Go figure.

People do a variety of things, for a variety of reasons. When it comes to recreation, I have friends who play bridge. I have friends who do square dancing. Then I also have friends who get out into nature to find whatever it is that we can find there.

This seems to be an age of addictions. Those of us in the technological world are addicted to our calculators, computers, television sets, DVD players, and so on. We are just as much addicted to our motor vehicles. If I can step out onto the Trail periodically without all of these things, I am shedding my addictions. I am getting real with the earth and its Creator. Instead of the instant gratification of driving 50 miles in as many minutes, I am walking one step at a time. Instead of the visual impact of television, billboards, or massive edifices, I am looking at the beauty of the natural world.

The human mind is like a computer: garbage in, garbage out. In a recent job, I was a part-time salad maker at a large steakhouse. The cooks and grill guys used the most vulgar language possible, and filled the air with loud gangsta rap music from their boom box. When I got home, I didn't feel particularly uplifted.

By contrast, when I go on the Trail, I lose all that noise. Instead of loud electronic music and pointless vulgarity, I am listening to bird song. I am listening to the silence.

And if I listen to the silence long enough, I will begin to hear the words that cannot be spoken.

That is why I hike.