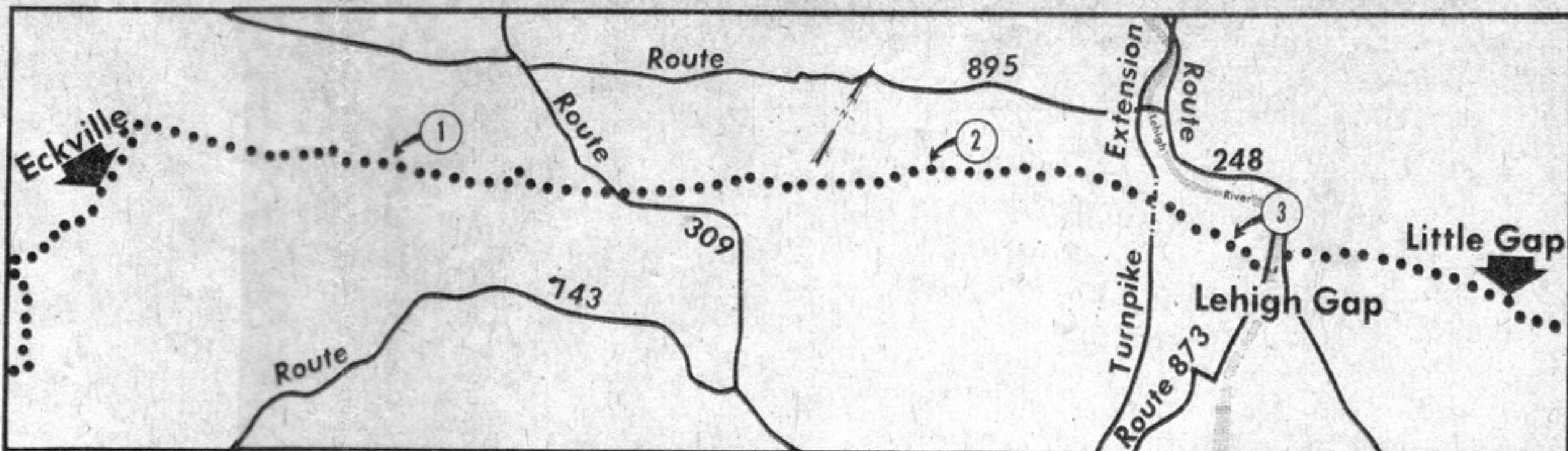


# The long pathway: It's all things to all persons

We asked for volunteers from our staff to hike the Lehigh Valley's section of the Appalachian Trail and were swamped with offers. Ron Devlin of the Lehigh Valley Bureau and Randy Murray of the Easton Bureau drew the assignment and their rations and made the trip. Herewith, the first of five stories on their experiences.

By RANDALL MURRAY  
Of the Call-Chronicle

The Appalachian Trail. Sometimes it's a wide grassy path, wet from last night's rain. Sometimes it's an exhausting, rocky climb. At times you could walk forever. Often you could flop down on the never-ending rocks and die. Looking down the narrow, winding trail, one feels his emotions range from a Rocky Mountain high to depression deeper than the valleys hikers must navigate. It's all things to all persons. It's a great teacher. It humbles. And yet it christens the successful hiker with a smugness, a certain superiority. The "Long Thin Strip of America" winds along mountains, valleys and roads from Mt. Oglethorpe in Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine, a distance of about 2,050 rugged miles. Established formally in 1937, the Appalachian Trail is known as one of the wonders of the outdoor world. It beckons to those who would commune with nature, talk to a tree or swear at one of several billion boulders. We walked it, or at least part of it. We talked with other hikers, shared their food and stories. We sat and listened and learned. We strode the woods and rocks and learned more. We drank the pure clear water bubbling out of the side of the mountain. Above us quite often we could see the hawks, gliding in big lazy circles. Startled at our approach, a big doe crashed across the trail and away into the thick woods. At one stop we read the words of other long-distance hikers. The hiker's register is a combination bulletin board and soapbox for the footloose set. This register — really just a tiny notebook — was nearly hidden in a wooden box nailed to the side of a tree. About 50 feet away was Dan's Pulpit, a great clump of rock, clinging to the south crest of the Blue Mountain just north and east of Eckville, a magnificent overlook. There in that smudged, well-used little book were entries which still linger in my mind, although I'm off the trail and clutched by the city. "The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," signed by two women. "Boy, these bugs really bite. Reminds me of the political scandals and news I am so far removed from. May 18, 1974.



## Here's the route

Hikers started at Eckville (far left) and camped at the Allentown Shelter (1) that night, 6.3 miles from departure.

The second night's stop was 10.8 miles farther on, at the Bake Oven Knob Shelter (2). The third day's trek of 8.1 miles

brought them to the George W. Outerbridge Shelter (3), near Lehigh Gap. Fourth day, they made Little Gap.



Murray (left) and Devlin step into forest at Eckville.

Bill Graham, Fairview Park, Ohio ... Georgia to Maine."

Then, a bit of trail chauvinism: "We are superior hikers with our Kelly Packs and Jensen Packs — SUPER PACKERS. We're in our 200th mile of the Appalachian Trail. Goodbye." And with that R.H. and P.C. took their leave on May 25. A bit of news I could have done very well without, thank you: "Saw two rattlesnakes 300 yards south of Dan's Pulpit."

The story wanders along the trail of the pudgy, cigar-chomping tourist, camera slung around his neck who approached a pack-laden hiker at a point where the trail winds through a southern national park.

"Hey, buddy," the tourist called, "where's that little path lead?"

The hiker barely turned and silenced the questioner with his reply.

"Maine," he said, and disappeared into the forest.

When the Call-Chronicle sought volunteers to hike a portion of the trail — seven staffers were trampled in the rush to sign up — my initial reaction was surprise — surprise that I actually wanted to try it.

The thought of hiking the famed woodsway intrigued me. My idea of a long walk was to trudge from my recliner to

the fridge for a mug of beer — five times a night. Tiring, that.

But our family is moderately outdoorsy. We go camping in the summer — in a tent, no less — and enjoy getting off the well-trod path. I had, I thought, much of the gear needed for a few days on the trail.

So I committed myself. Thinking back, I realize that actually I should have had myself committed.

The original plan was to dispatch one reporter to the trail for a few days to a week. The wife was not pleased. "No way," she declared. I think she was really afraid I might not come back — voluntarily.

Seriously, solitary hiking may be great for the soul and all that, but it's not too cool for the body; especially if the body breaks or sprains or gets chomped upon by serpents.

"As a final monition," cautions the Appalachian Trail Conference, "do not hike alone." A good rule to heed. What would have happened, however, if H.D. Thoreau had accepted that dictum and taken a few neighbors to Walden Pond?

After much consultation with Easton Call staffer Gary Kocher, an erstwhile hiker, and guidebooks he provided, the

grand plan was amended. Two scribes would take to the woods.

Then rose the question — who else? From the ranks emerged the chunky specter of Ron Devlin, fairly new to the Call-Chronicle, who covers the Carbon-Schuylkill County area.

Planning the hike was an exercise rivaling a Chinese fire drill for order and precision. It was finally determined that we would march out for four days and three nights. Following Kocher's advice, we mapped a route stretching from Eckville in Berks County to Little Gap, just north of Danielsville in Northampton County.

Why that distance and those points of entrance and exit were chosen should be taken into consideration by the novice hiker.

Along the trail, for those not familiar with outdoors protocol, camping and hiking clubs have built and continue to maintain a series of rough shelters for trail hikers. Log cabins in miniature, the three-sided shelters loomed up out of the growing dusk at the most propitious times, it seemed.

We mapped out our hike to give us enough time daily to reflect upon the countryside, take the necessary pictures, collapse occasionally, and still reach each shelter before nightfall.

On the first day, according to plan, we were to begin at Eckville, hike uphill for the first two miles, level off and then camp for the night at the Allentown Shelter, although it's nowhere near Allentown. A day's work of 6.3 miles.

The second day was what we casually referred to as a deleted expletive. It would see us cross Route 309 at the crest of the mountain, hike past the New Tripoli Shelter, which is nowhere near New Tripoli, and bed down for the night at the Bake Oven Knob Shelter. That haven, for some reason, is less than a mile east of the Bake Oven Knob. That day's walk was to be 10.8 mind-boggling miles.

Then, said the plan, if we survived the second day we would attempt the 8.1 miles to the George W. Outerbridge Shelter. Don't ask, I don't know where he is. The shelter, however, is less than a mile from the Lehigh Gap below Palmerton.

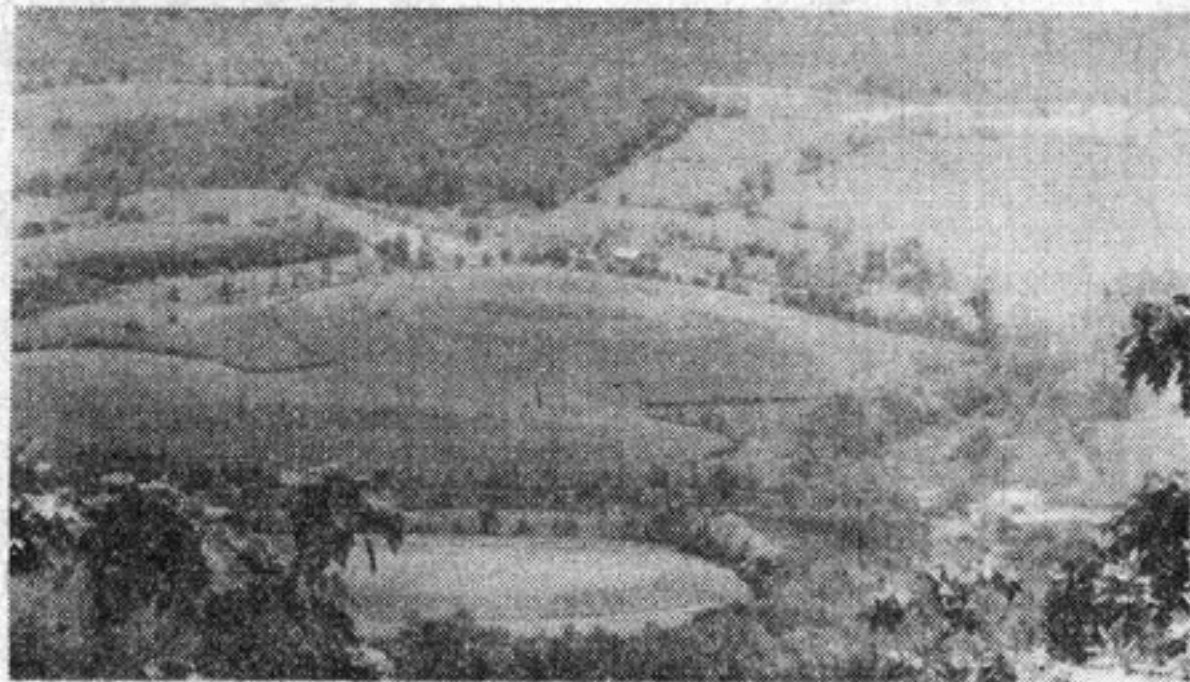
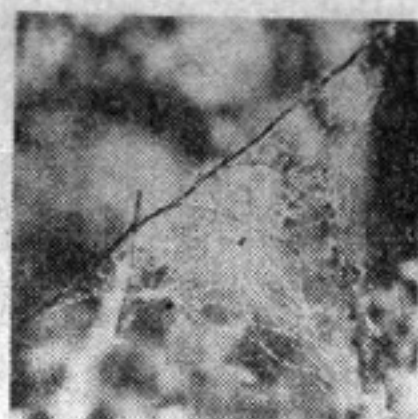
From there, we were to trundle down the Gap, across the river, scale the Alpine-like east cliff and over to Little Gap where we would quit. The fourth day's hike was to have been six miles.

That was how it was to have been. However, capricious woman of the wilds, Ma Nature, had a few wet words to say about that.

**TOMORROW** — A brief interruption, some frustration and the continuation.

## gallery

Nature's designs — dew-dappled spider web and hawk tailing in flight; reminders that man is the stranger in this place.



Devlin and No. 1 walking stick ford tiny stream at start of trip (left), while droppings of 20th-century American Dodo decorate the trail near Bake Oven Knob.



Pure, chilly spring quenches Murray's thirst during refreshment break, trail-style. Bursts of Mountain Laurel (below), brilliant white and soft pink, in first week of growth along Appalachian Trail.

Oval patterns of Berks County field (above) highlight view from Dan's Pulpit. Relaxing after long day's hike, new friends share old stories at Outerbridge Shelter.

