

The long pathway: Trail is a freeze-dried pleasure

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It was a bad beginning. We weren't even officially on the trail, didn't even have our packs on and already we were in trouble. Devin and I had been carted up to the starting point at Eckville, by Call photographer Ken Clauser. All the way from Allentown we chattered, avoiding the awful thought, "What if we both chicken out and refuse to get out of the car?"

It was a good day, one good omen. The country sun was bright, the sky clear when we pulled off the narrow road into the dusty drive marking the Appalachian Trail. "No Outlet!" a sign warned.

Ken parked the car beside a weathered building and helped us unload. We were ready.

Just then a gentleman of questionable temperament burst from a nearby farmhouse. At first glance we could tell he wasn't the official greeter for the Appalachian Trail.

"Get that car out of here, get it back on the road," he shouted. "Why the hell do you think we have the signs up? Get out of here."

Reason did not prevail. After attempted explanations of who we were and what we were doing and pointing out that the company car would be there for no more than 15 minutes, we ignored him. He disappeared into the house.

For a few seconds I was really afraid — afraid he would emerge cradling a shotgun, or worse, take a potshot from a window. No such luck, however. We still had to hike.

Our bible was a little green soft-covered book, "Guide to the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania" published by the Keystone Trails Association of Concordville, Delaware County. It is a must for a hiker. Groups in other states provide similar documents for their areas.

Our first reference read: "9.4 (a mileage reference from Port Clinton), where blue-blazed trail goes left 100 yards to a spring, A.T. turns right into low growth, crossing a swampy area. Cross Pine Creek."

We crossed Pine Creek with no incidents. It was about 10:15 a.m. We followed the path marked off by the trademark at the Appalachian Trail, two-by-six-inch white blazes on trees and rocks, into the woods. The forest closed the door behind us and we looked forward at the hill waiting ahead.

It was a rude awakening. When the KTA book said "trail becomes rocky" and "trail uses a gullied road" it becomes apparent that the guidebook was written by a master of understatement.

An hour and a half and 1.3 miles later we reached a blue-blazed side trail for Hawk Mountain, checked our time and decided against taking it. Wise choice.

Checking our topographical maps we discovered we had climbed about 850 feet in less than a mile and a half. We wondered if we could catch Clauser if we ran.

At that point the trail leveled out to a pleasant forest road, about five feet wide and grassy — but still strewn with the ubiquitous Blue Mountain rocks.

Two miles and two hours into the trip we hit our first landmark, Dan's Pulpit.

The rocky overlook is named for Dan Hoch, known as "hiking's grand old man." Hoch, the story goes, used to preach Sunday services from the crag.

Our pace was much slower than we had anticipated. We had planned to do at least two miles an hour. We had managed half that.

About 2:15 p.m. we reached what the book called Deer Spring and the trail sign referred to as Dan's Spring. We had walked slightly more than three miles.

It was our first encounter with a spring and the near vertical climb down 100 yards to the clear water convinced me that Devin should have brought a case of beer.

At 3:30 we reached a sign which said "Rte 309, 5.5 miles." We calculated that we had hiked 5.1 miles in a little more than five hours. Our primary holdup was photography. Naturally, the first day was enthralling. So we stopped and took numerous photos.

A short time later the trail became miserable. My sweat-stained notebook records it as "uphill, rocks, hechh — near death, tired."

Then we found the woods road—level, carpeted and, according to the book, only two-tenths of a mile from a shelter. Tired and drenched with perspiration, we hiked on in silence. Talking, we discovered, saps strength.



Clean shelter

Using a makeshift broom, Murray sweeps dust and dirt from Allentown Shelter at end of first day on trail.

Call reporters Randall Murray of the Easton Bureau and Ron Devlin of the Lehigh Bureau tell of their experiences as they hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail. Here is the second of five articles on their trek.

The shelter, set back from the trail in a small clearing, was empty. We made ourselves at home. Fashioning a makeshift broom from branches cut from a bush and tied to Ron's walking stick, I swept out the shelter. Its plywood floor was raised about three feet above ground level, its open side faced away from the trail. A well-built stone fireplace served for heat, light and cooking.

It was here that we discovered the benefits of the \$30 worth of freeze-dried food we had stuffed into my pack. Dinner in the woods that night was a truly movable feast. We dined on succulent freeze-dried beef patties, freeze-dried carrots, Ron's brick-like but wonderfully satisfying Lithuanian bread and washed it all down with steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

The hike to the spring was quite a trek — about 800 yards — downhill. It was a good spring, pouring cold water into a pool. In went the canteens, they bubbled and sank and came out, full.

To bed. I had brought a lightweight air mattress of sorts, a piece of plastic with puffs of air pockets along the surface. It weighed next to nothing and served me well.

Despite the day's exertions, sleep did not come quickly. We tossed and turned, unfamiliar with the hard board beneath us. During the night I was awakened by much profane snoring from Ron's side of the shelter.

"Dirty xxxccxxx!! sleeping bag! Blankety-blank zipper won't work." I chuckled quietly into my sleeping bag and went back to sleep.

Rain visited during the night and left the day gray and forbidding. I was up first to make a fire, teepee style, like the Indians. A little fire is all that's needed to cook. Another fine meal, courtesy of Mountain House of Oregon: eggs and bacon, bread, raisins and more cocoa.

An important discovery. Freeze-dried eggs are very difficult to remove from a mess kit without steel wool or some sort of scrubber.

After cleaning up we were back on the trail by about 9:15 a.m. The packs didn't feel too bad, the trail was great and we started off fast to put as many of the days 10.8 miles behind us as soon as possible.

The mountain laurel was starting to pop open. Surprisingly, it has no real odor. Reminds one of the beauty of the peacock and the shock of his strident cry.

The lush grass was drenched and soon the wet worked through the waterproofing of our boots and soaked our feet.

But we were making excellent time. Made the Jacksonville-Snyders road — two miles — in about 45 minutes.

By this time the rain had become heavier, and we brought one of Ron's better ideas — the Lithuanian bread was No. 1 — into play. We covered the packs with large plastic garbage bags.

Not realizing how quickly we were hiking, I was startled to see the bright yellow carcass of an abandoned school bus pop up out of the woods. We were at Route 309 and Ansbach's Motel and Restaurant, or so the guidebook reported. Ansbach's changed hands several years ago and is now known as Brennan's.

The weather picture was not good. A downpour and dense fog made the return to the trail not an inviting thought. A five-day weather forecast procured through the Chronicle desk by phone was equally discouraging. It called for rain through Friday. This was Wednesday.

After at least an hour of hassling, we decided to temporarily scrub the rest of the hike. The thought of getting wet and staying wet for three days had little appeal. No purists, we. So Ken Clauser motored up, loaded us and our gear into the car and headed south for Allentown. The sun came out.

We renewed the hike about 9:40 a.m. Saturday June 8, a gray day. We felt as though we had never left the crest of the mountain. There was little rain, however.

On our initial trek, we had encountered no other hikers. This day, however, our thoughts were interrupted by the sharp barking of a German Shepherd pup. Satch the sentinel had alerted his two human companions to our approach. After a brief conversation and scratching of ears, we moved on.

The fog still clung to the underbrush and wetness dripped from overhanging branches. I discovered why my choice of headgear is called a bush hat — it gets caught in all the bushes.

An ominous buzzing sound, high in the air, told us we had reached the power line, 2.2 miles from 309. Good time, 2.2 miles in less than an hour.

Visibility was quite limited and our view of the Lehigh Valley was wiped out. Up to that point the trail had been comfortable. Then the rocks resumed.

We had worried about a section of the trail labeled by the KTA book as "the cliffs." The book's instructions were "turn left, follow knife edge known as 'the cliffs,' with view ahead of Baer Rocks."

They are, indeed, a knife edge. The bald rocks slip away sharply from the narrow path. A misstep could be quite painful if not fatal. It didn't really take too long to traverse the cliffs, only about 20 minutes, but it seemed much longer.

About half a mile beyond we came upon Baer Rocks, an impressive jumble of mammoth rocks, stacked in patterns, God's building blocks. We scrambled up the pile.

chimney spire of rock a camped. Shirtless, his hair blowing over his head, a man made his way over to my mountain."

got to the Bake Oven attraction, the more lithe point, at a clearing idrafted ring of rocks large plastic bag full of other trash had been

he road leading to the Oven Knob, I wondered would rip up the woods

and desecrate the wilderness with the parking lot built there.

It's about 10 times the size needed and dotted with trash. The raucous crashing of music from a car radio clashed with the surroundings. We were glad to get past that.

The fog continued to hang close to the mountain and there was no view from the knob, so we pressed on, over the "rock slide" and toward the shelter, half a mile away.

We should have made a reservation. The shelter area was teeming with humanity, Girl Scouts here, Boy Scouts there and transient hikers shaking their heads and walking on.

Fortunately the Girl Scouts had an extra tent set up and we quickly accepted the offer that we use it. Our neighbors were two amusingly sophisticated 14-year-old Girl Scouts from Woodbury, N.J.

They scoffed at our firemaking efforts — philistines — and our crude packs and gear. We got the best of them at dinner-time, however. We nailed those kids right to the tree when we unlimbered our beef stroganoff, baked potatoes, peas, Lithuanian bread and cocoa.

We went to bed in the cramped, lightweight tent with the sounds of pre-pubes-

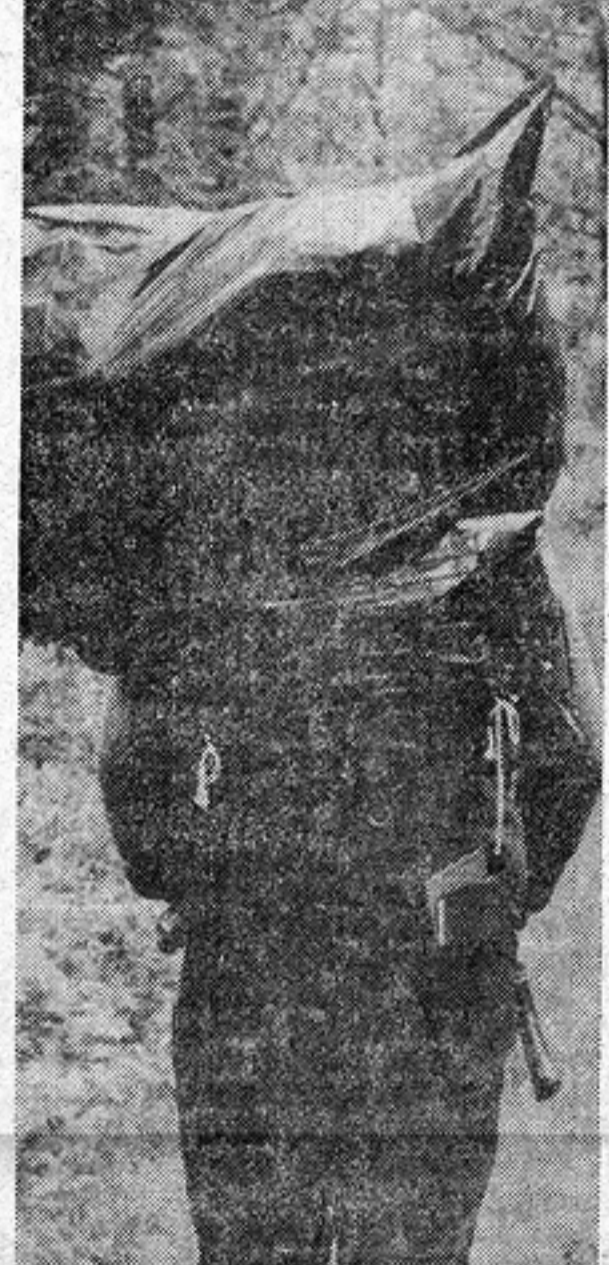
cent Boy Scouts taunting the Girl Scouts. Song of life. Again, sleep was not a constant visitor, but flitted in and out of the tent.

Another foggy dawn. I was up first, making the fire, starting breakfast, an ulterior motive lurking in the nether regions of my devious mind. When the first signs of life emerged from Ron's sleeping bag, I even volunteered to scale the path down to the spring.

When the breakfast of cheese omelette, yummy raisin bread and coffee was ready, Ron realized he had been had. He had to do the dishes again. The omelette had attached itself to the mess kit with a strange ferocity. Off I wandered to the spring, the first one we had found which appeared to be of questionable purity. The water was good, however, and neither of us ran screaming into the bushes at any time, afflicted by that dreaded condition of the trail.

Beyond the shelter we found the first noticeable lapses in marking of the trail. We lost it, found it, then lost it again. It apparently has not been blazed for some time and the comforting white paintmarks, many of them on rocks, are badly faded.

About 3.8 miles from the shelter we made our first major mistake. I'm not sure whether we missed a double blaze, indicating a turn, or whether there was



Modern raingear

Large garbage bag serves as easily-stored protection for sleeping bag and loaded pack.

none, but at a turnpike commission radar tower we kept going straight when we should have turned left. Although we walked only about 300 yards out of our way, we were annoyed by the mistake.

By this time the mist and fog had cleared and, about 2 miles from the Outerbridge shelter ahead, Ron and I split up. We had made good time, about 3.3 miles in 70 minutes. It was hot, we were sweating, but we felt good.

The trail branched off, with a side trail along the north crest of the mountain. I took it and found the most thrilling view of the trip. With no large trees in front of me, I looked up the valley of the Lehigh, along the turnpike for miles. I waved at the pilot of a small plane, just a few hundred feet above me. He wagged his wings, or so I thought. All was not beauty and peace, however. Clouds of smoke pouring from the smokestacks of the smelters of the New Jersey Zinc Co. in Palmerton cast a foul haze along the valley. As I continued my solitary walk — worrying about snakes all the way — the vegetation grew more stunted and scrubby. Many bare trees were in evidence.

Rock piles bordered and sprawled onto the trail. As I fretted about reptiles I accidentally kicked a long stick beside the trail which launched a curly, snake-like hunk of wood directly into my path. There was very nearly a trailside change of trousers.

At the top of the mountain was a partially-hidden block building, sprouting large antennae. A man moved beside it. Running low on water, I hailed him and walked toward the top.

It turned out he was a member of an amateur radio group from Western Electric. They were taking part in a nationwide contest, trying to contact as many fellow hams as possible. As they searched for extra water, I heard the operator talking to Nebraska.

"How about a beer?" one fellow asked me. Get thee hence, Satan, I thought. And, although I was hot, sweaty and very thirsty, I said, no thanks. They were big cans, I said, and I didn't want to fall over with cramps.

"We have some little cans, like this," he said slyly, proffering a 7-ounce icy container of nectar. Like Oscar Wilde, I can resist anything but temptation.

When, 30 minutes later, I found Ron lolling in the shade at the Outerbridge shelter, I allowed him to make the expected snide remark. "What kept you?"

"I stopped for a cold beer," I replied matter-of-factly.

By nightfall there were four of us at the shelter, by far the most enjoyable night of the trip. There was Mark, hiking the entire trail, and Will, a marvelously well spoken actor from Long Island.

All of us tossed a little something into the pot and wound up with a great steaming batch of chicken stew with rice, green beans, THE bread, with freeze-dried strawberries for dessert.

It had a great spring, the best. Ice water rolled out of a pipe into a quarter beer keg cut in half lengthwise.

That night we had all retired by 9:30. I tried to fall asleep, the distant lights of Slatington winking at me. Suddenly a great rattling cacophony came from the bunk below me where only my pack reposed.

Knowing full well that a starving grizzly was ripping my pack apart, I grabbed my bedside hatchet and flashlight and prepared to do battle with — a rotten little mouse.

Trail-wise, Mark warned, "Better hang all the packs up, or he'll be back and chew hell out of them." We did.

The next morning, Monday, Mark was up by 6 a.m., ate his usual breakfast of three or four pop-tarts, large handfuls of a mixture of raisins, chocolate bits and peanuts and hit the trail by 6:30.

Ron and I breakfasted on sumptuous freeze-dried tuna fish salad sandwiches, bequeathed the remaining four inches of Lithuanian bread to a grateful Will and launched ourselves into our final day by 7:40 a.m.

Going down the mountain into the Lehigh Gap wasn't much trouble. Going up the other side was premeditated murder. It was the first point in the hike where we became so exhausted and out of breath that we didn't know if we could make it.

We took the side trail, about which the guidebook said, "a blue-blazed trail continues along old railroad bed for some distance, turns right up mountain for a more gradual and sheltered ascent."

If that trail was "more gradual and sheltered," the main trail must have been reserved for mountain goats with oxygen bottles.

The smoke and haze billowing from the smelters was even more visibly shifting down the valley. Again, trees on the hillside were dead or dying, either from pollution or possibly from a fire many years ago.

We'd struggle up the 50 degree incline for about 100 yards then keel over and pant for five minutes. Then we'd repeat the whole sordid scene. The theory of editorial volunteerism got a pretty thorough scatological workout on the hillside.

We spent a lot more time horizontal than vertical. It took us more than an hour and 15 minutes to crawl that three-quarters of a mile.

It was, by far, the worst section of the near 32-mile hike.

Once on top of the mountain, however, we bounced back surprisingly fast. Not much to attract the eye up there — scrubby vegetation, hot sun, dry trail, little cover.

We ran into two hikers who said Mark was about an hour in front of us. Apparently he didn't do too much better going up the hill.

We clambered down 100 yards to another spring, more out of habit than need, and loaded up about 11:30. We were only 1.3 miles from Little Gap.

On reaching the two-lane highway crossing the mountain at Little Gap, we broke into simultaneous grins, shook hands and pronounced ourselves accomplished hikers. We agreed that our assignment was over and we could legally hitch-hike down into Danielsville.

The trip ended as it had begun, with traces of theater of the absurd. Driving the first car to come along, incredibly, was my wife's cousin, John.

He didn't stop.

TOMORROW: A variety of people hike