

The long pathway

Everybody's hiking these days

Call reporters Randall Murray of the Easton Bureau and Ron Devlin of the Lehighton Bureau tell of their experiences as they hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail. This is the third of a five-part series.

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One of the most fascinating things about hiking on the Appalachian Trail is the variety of people you meet. The normal social indicators — age, sex, race, educational background or income level — don't seem to be reliable in predicting the type of person who enjoys hiking. As one hiker put it, "You're liable to run into anybody out here."

Our four-day encounter with the trail bore out our friend's comments. At various points, we met a middle-aged florist, a young Broadway actor, an electrical engineer, an ex-industrial worker, two college students, a troop of Girl Scouts, two troops of Boy Scouts and several others with whom we didn't stop to chat.

Unfortunately, we didn't get to meet a 62-year-old grandmother who was walking the entire trail alone. According to persons at the Bake Oven Knob Shelter, she passed through there several hours before we arrived to spend the night. We were never able to catch the veteran hiker. Guess it was because of our inexperience.

We did, however, have the pleasure of meeting Mark Strittmatter, a 21-year-old Indiana, Pa., resident, who is hiking the entire 2,050 miles of the trail from Georgia to Maine. Along with Will Fenno, a Long Island actor, the four of us spent a night camped at the George W. Outerbridge Shelter, about a mile west of the Lehigh Gap.

Somewhat reluctantly, Mark, a former Indiana University student, accepted our offer to share the evening meal. He insisted, however, on contributing a cup of rice to our dehydrated chicken stew, a move characteristic of a true backpacker's individuality and self-reliance.

Resting briefly after the meal, Mark related some of his experiences along the 1,150 miles of the trail he had covered since March 31. He expects to finish the remaining 900 miles by Sept. 1.

His experiences included an encounter with the aftereffects of two tornadoes in North Carolina and appreciation of the spring-like beauty of the 110-mile Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

Mark said two hikers were killed during the tornadoes. Noting that he doesn't carry rain gear, the veteran hiker said, "I got pretty wet, but that's about all."

He continued, "I carry only five days' supply of food. Therefore, I must walk, rain or shine. If I don't make it to the next resupply point, I don't eat."

He said the trail through Pennsylvania rivals the Shenandoah National Park in the number of persons using it and the beauty of the scenery. He said the vegetation in both places is similar but the large amounts of glacial rock in Pennsylvania make the hiking among the roughest he has experienced.

The most singular thing about the young outdoorsman is his diet. He starts the day with "Pop Tarts" which he finds to be good energy suppliers. His lunch is a half pound of a mixture of raisins, peanuts and chocolate chips. Raisins supply the necessary iron, the peanuts are rich in protein and the chocolate is another good energy supplier, he explained.

His only hot meal each day is in the evening and consists mainly of dried soups

with rice added to supply starch and carbohydrates. He said the rice expands in his stomach and "fills me up." Believe it or not, the slim 125-pounder has gained seven pounds in the 2½ months he has been on the trail.

We supplied an added treat for both Mark and Will. Several slices of Lithuanian rye bread, which I was carrying, turned the marginal meal into a "stick to your ribs" type. Will took the heel of the loaf with him when we parted the next morning after breakfast. It was our last day on the trail and we wouldn't be needing the bread.

Mark said chocolate is a great supplier of quick energy and also produces heat. He said eating a chocolate bar at night when you're cold is almost like putting on another blanket. He once bought all the chocolate bars in a small town in which he was resupplying and a friend with whom he was hiking bought all the peanut butter cups.

Carrying an unusually shaped walking stick he picked up in the Laurel Gorge in North Carolina, the red-bearded hiker was packed and ready to hit the trail just as we were crawling out of our sleeping bags. He planned to cover 25 miles, an unbelievable feat considering the day began with the mile-long climb up the steep, barren, eastern side of the Lehigh Gap. Mark's average for the entire trip was 20 miles a day and his longest daily trek was 35 miles.

A feeling of sadness hit me as Mark's willowy figure disappeared down the rocky mountainside trail. It was the kind of feeling you get when you say goodby to a friend. In this case, one you probably would never see again.

Will Fenno, who has done dramatic work on Broadway, used a bamboo pole as his walking stick. The slender, but muscular, medium-height actor arrived at the Outerbridge Shelter in late afternoon, remarking facetiously, "I'm a little tired after a tough day." He had just crossed Lehigh Gap, traveling west, and the steep climb up the rocky trail to the shelter is enough to tire even a veteran packer. Coming as it did at the end of the day, the half-mile climb would challenge an experienced mountain climber.

Will, who was traveling from Delaware Water Gap to Harrisburg, said his reasons for hiking were "inexplicable." He said he was tired of everything else and wanted to experience something new, but he disliked "packaged" vacations.

He continued, "When you're out of work as often as you are in this business (acting), you look for a cheap holiday."

One of our most interesting and educational encounters was with two college students who were camped alongside the trail a few miles east of the Lehigh Gap. Len Schwarz, a student at Moravian, had just finished baking a blueberry cake as we arrived. That's right, a blueberry cake. And it was delicious.

Karl Bachman, also a Moravian student, told us he has already cooked cubed steak and vegetables on the trail. He explained that the meat and vegetables are wrapped in aluminum foil and placed in the hot coals of a fire. "The protective jacket of foil acts just like a pressure cooker. The meat and vegetables are cooked in their natural juices," he added.

Obviously, outdoor luxuries such as blueberry cake and cubed steak are not the fare of the long-distance hiker.

Bob Gersitz of Allentown, an engineer at Western Electric, commented on the hiking explosion. He said that everybody is hiking now. "That's good because it shows they're interested, but I don't think the trail can handle the influx."

The all-too-numerous incidence of garbage and litter scattered along the trail bore out the engineer's comments.

Tomorrow: Ron Devlin describes a possible weekend trip along one of the easier sections of the Appalachian Trail.



Len Schwarz bakes cake on trail