

The long pathway

You can take family on this weekend hike

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. This is the fourth of a five-part series.



RON DEVLIN
... at Tri-County Corner

By RON DEVLIN
Of the Call-Chronicle

The natural beauty of the Pennsylvania mountains decorated with blossoming laurel bushes, the rugged deposits of Ice Age glacial rock and the impressive views of fertile farming valleys make the tiring, sometimes exhausting, hike along the Appalachian Trail well worth the effort.

Unfortunately, many people are denied such experiences because they lack the time to go on long hikes, have young children who cannot stand the rigors of the trip or just aren't aware that such joys exist.

With this in mind, two Call-Chronicle reporters who recently hiked a 35-mile section of the trail between Eckville and Little Gap, designed a hike that has all the features of a long backpacking trip, but can be done on a weekend.

The overnight hike begins at the point where the trail crosses Route 309 on top of the Blue Mountain. The hiker heads west for four miles to the Allentown Shelter, then an additional mile to the Tri-County Corner, at which Berks, Lehigh and Schuylkill counties meet.

This section of the trail is relatively level and not too rocky, so it might be a good place for a family trip. It is important to remember, however, the Appalachian Trail is no pushover. Even its easier sections are more rugged than many mountain trails.

In the morning, Dad, Mom and the kids could get on the trail near Brennan's Bar and Restaurant on Route 309, hike to the Allentown Shelter, set up camp and have lunch. Leaving their gear at the shelter, the family could continue west to the Tri-County Corner in the afternoon. After viewing the three counties from atop the large formation of glacial rock and perhaps taking a few pictures, the family could hike back to the shelter for the evening meal.

They could sleep overnight in the shelter, an open-faced structure resembling a log cabin with a fireplace in front. It's no Waldorf-Astoria, but it beats sleeping out in the rain. However, it would be advisable to take along a tent in case the shelter is already occupied.

A good breakfast the next morning should prepare the weekend hikers for the trek back to the car. Barring blisters or other mishaps, the family should be back

on the highway headed for home by early afternoon.

In this short trip — five miles each way — hikers encounter just about every experience to which the long-distance backpacker is exposed. The section of trail just off Route 309 was once a wilderness road. It is now a grassy path lined with laurel, the state flower. A bit further on, the trail begins to rise slightly and becomes rocky, but in comparison with other areas, it's not bad.

If it's a clear day, one can catch a glimpse of a body of water to the east as the trail begins to rise. It is the Jacksonsville Reservoir.

The Allentown Shelter itself is something to see. Situated in a grassy clearing near the ridge of the mountain, the log-cabin type structure reminds one of an earlier era. A fairly good spring is situated on a side trail about three-tenths of a mile down the mountain. The side trail is marked with blue blazes.

Although the Appalachian Trail guidebook doesn't mention anything about the spring drying up in hot weather, it might be advisable to take along enough water, just in case the spring is low. It would be especially advisable during July and August.

The trail from the Allentown Shelter to the Tri-County Corner is the roughest part of this stretch. For a short distance from the shelter, it is rocky and lined with tall, thorny blackberry bushes.

The Tri-County Corner monument, a short distance off the trail on a blue-blazed side path, is located atop a random formation of glacial rock. The view from the point where the boundaries of three counties meet is excellent. To the north lie the farmlands of West Penn Township, Schuylkill County, along Route 895. Looking to the southwest, one sees the green and brown checkered farmlands of Albany Township, Berks County. To the southeast, the scene is similar, but the geographic location is Lynn Township, Lehigh County.

It is not uncommon to find several large, red-tailed hawks riding the air currents, their sharp eyes searching every crack and crevice for the next meal.

A schedule for the weekend trip might go something like this.

Saturday

9 a.m. — Get on trail at Brennan's Bar and Restaurant on Route 309, about two miles south of the intersection with Route 895. Hike west to the Allentown Shelter.

Noon — Arrive at shelter, set up camp, eat lunch.

2 p.m. — Hike west to Tri-County Corner (about a one-hour walk).

4 p.m. — Begin hike back to shelter.

5 p.m. — Cook evening meal and spend night at the shelter.

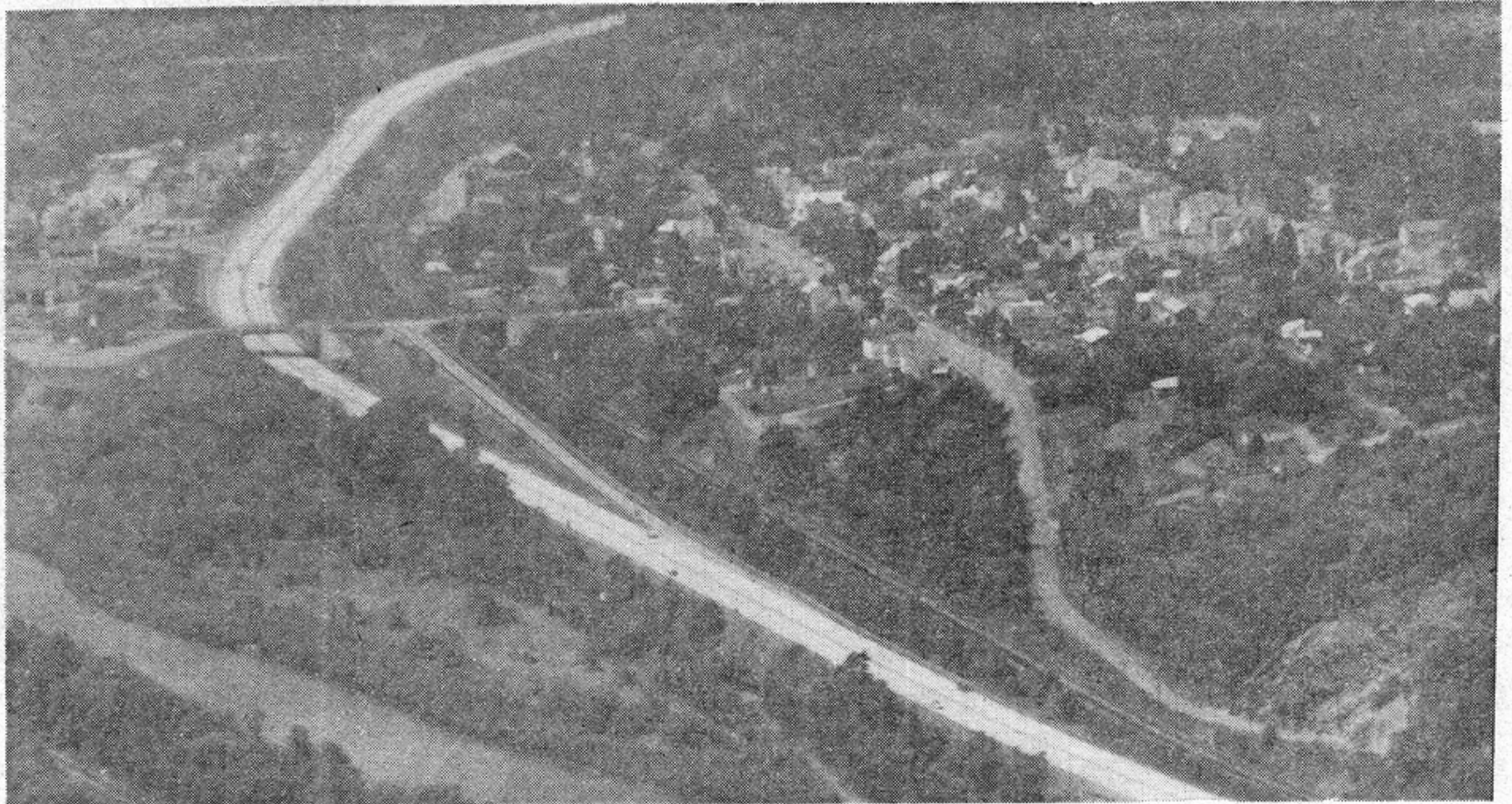
Sunday

8 a.m. — Breakfast.

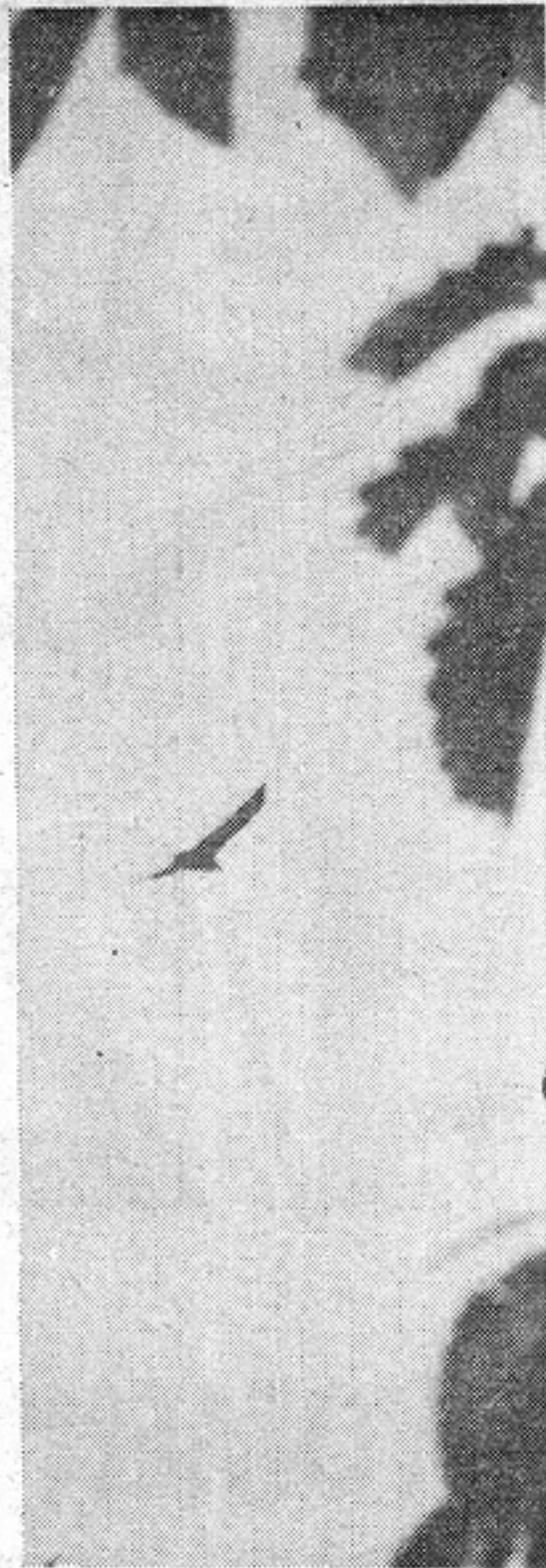
9 a.m. — Break camp. Hike back to Route 309.

Noon — Arrive at Route 309. Leave for home.

Tomorrow: Some tips on equipment.



Looking north along R. 248, hikers can see Palmerton



Searching

A soaring hawk circles above the trail, keeping a sharp eye out for his next meal.



Mountain laurel adds beauty to hike