

John Raleigh continued

Forty years is a long time but some memories from that time are still vivid, in random order:

Walking for days without meeting anyone. Sitting under my tarp to escape the rain or mosquitos or both. The discovery of a bakery when in town for supplies. The approach of a thunderstorm on a hot night. The anticipation of crossing the Kennebec. Missing music and then finding some at a folk concert in Harper's Ferry. Enjoying the simplicity of life on the trail. Being totally comfortable in the woods and with the experience of long term hiking and camping. Cooking basic biscuits in a small campfire. Sleeping under the stars on a beach in Maine watching the Perseid meteor shower and waking up in the morning to find bear prints all around me. Aching from sleeping on shelter floors. The 27 mile crossing in Pennsylvania. The high water mark on the buildings in Susquehanna. Marine jets flying through mountain passes just above the trees. Bootleggers, pot farmers and moss gatherers. Mona and Beno in Damascus. Foot self surgery (often). Attempting to bathe daily. Wishing for switchbacks. Sleeping on a thick bed of moss with my own private spring at Mizpah Spring Hut (because the hut was full), boo hoo. Wondering if huge bulls would mind us walking through their fields. Tuna and beans. Macaroni and cheese. Instant oatmeal with hot chocolate. Spice cake (the whole cake) in Delaware Water Gap. Meeting family and friends in Pawling, NY over the 4th of July weekend. Being so tired I slept in the middle of the trail. Seeing the trail disappear into a beaver pond, many times. Fighting off dogs with my walking stick. Reading by candlelight most nights. Chocolate bars dipped in peanut butter. Seeing how long cheese would last without refrigeration. Eating enough for four people every day. Crossing state lines. Hiking in a warm rain (lots of it). Walking through spruce forests in the fog. Taking a cold plunge after a long day on the trail. Reading a good book by candle light. Chocolate dipped in peanut butter...

I met lots of great people on the trail, including Ed Garvey the day before we passed through Pine Grove Furnace State Park, although most only fleetingly. The camaraderie with other through hikers along the way exposed a very unique bond. Sharing epic tales of insects, rainy weather, high water, and high volume food consumption including recipes for specialty foods, like tuna and baked beans.

What could be better than hiking and living in the woods for 5 months? I still haven't thought of anything. To this day hiking the AT has probably had more effect on the trajectory of my life than any other event.

Looking back at the gear we used it's amazing the evolution since.

In 1974 the number of companies making backpacking gear was far fewer than today. Lightweight equipment was 2 to 3 times heavier than it is now. Leather boots with Vibram soles have been replaced by lightweight synthetic models and breathable/waterproof fabrics didn't exist. The use of Velcro was limited. We used walking sticks of wood. Wearing cotton wasn't illegal.

After hiking the trail I worked in an outdoors store in Providence, R.I for several years and went hiking or rock climbing frequently and then the travel bug hit me again. This time it was off to Antarctica to spend a year at South Pole Station, followed by hiking many of the major tracks on the South Island of New Zealand. Then back to the Antarctic Peninsula for a shorter (5 month) tour followed by another few months of living in the White Mountains of New Hampshire before settling into a 20 year career in high tech. I am currently a photographer and web developer running a small business with my wife Sarah, who is a graphic designer. We still camp, although mostly from sea kayaks, and enjoy hiking, biking, and the outdoors in general.

John stands triumphantly at the summit of Katahdin on August 19, 1974 with his wooden hiking staff. Photo courtesy John Raleigh

