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**VACATION FROM CIVILIZATION: THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF
THRU-HIKING ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**

A Thesis in
Kinesiology
by
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Abstract

This thesis delves into the origins and emergence of thru-hiking on the Appalachian Trail. It will discuss why the trail was built, who the first thru-hikers were, and why thru-hiking suddenly increased in popularity in the 1970s. It will consider what type of experiences thru-hiking aimed for, as well as how such experiences became possible. The Appalachian Trail was built to be a place for personalized recreation apart from modern society. Entrenched in how Americans have used the trail is a socially constructed dualism which places civilization and wilderness on opposite ends of the spectrum of human control. Overtime, the trail became a place where growing numbers of people went for prolonged but temporary periods. By the 1970s, a sudden increase of hikers began to take vacations from civilization for months at a time. In record numbers long-distance-trekkers began hiking the entire Appalachian Trail in a single trip. Utilizing contemporary wilderness ideals, hikers envisioned themselves gaining authentic experiences that appeared unattainable in the civilization they seemingly left behind.

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Introduction – Civilization at Every Turn

During the Second World War Earl Shaffer spent four and a half years in the Pacific Theatre. Like many young American men of his generation, with the future of human civilization at stake, he served in the war to defend his society. When he finally returned to the United States, the twenty-nine-year-old veteran from Pennsylvania set out from Mount Oglethorpe in Georgia and started hiking north on the Appalachian Trail (AT). When Shaffer reached the summit of Mount Katahdin in Maine over four months later, he became the first person to thru-hike the “AT.”¹ From terminus to terminus without interruption, as Shaffer put it, the more than two-thousand-mile-long continuous trek of the entire trail provided a way to “walk the army out of my system.”²

It is hard to imagine today but there was a time in American history when going to nature for recreation would have been unthinkable. Civilization and nature were once quite clearly at odds – the controlled versus the uncontrollable. Yet in 1948, having done his duty to keep the controlled world intact, the wild world is where Shaffer felt he needed to go to escape the grim memories of the killing fields of the South Pacific.

In this thesis I delve into the origins and emergence of thru-hiking on the Appalachian Trail, what the hikers that trekked over the Appalachian Mountains affectionately nicknamed the AT. As I engaged this project my research led me to focus on the personal motivations of early thru-hikers, their perceptions of civilization and wilderness, and their preoccupation with individual experience. In choosing to focus on the experiences described by the hikers themselves, I will pass over delving into other areas, such as the role of gender, class, or race. These factors likely played a part in the

emergence of thru-hiking on the Appalachian Trail and are important considerations for future research. I focused on the existential aspects of a thru-hike because that was the main focus of the thru-hikers as well. Moreover, connections between modernity, the new individualism of the 1970s, and changing wilderness ideals were overwhelming.

A large portion of primary source research was found at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), based in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia.³ Just being there influenced my thinking on the subject of thru-hiking. The ATC is one of many places thru-hikers traditionally stop as they traverse the AT heading north or south. It is about a quarter of a mile off the AT. For hikers who have traveled over a thousand miles to get there and will be traveling another thousand once they leave, it is a nominal distance.

Once thru-hikers reach the ATC's headquarters they pass through a visitor's center and head toward "the hiker's lounge." On shelves in the visitor's area books penned by thru-hikers about their treks are for sale, some of which were used as sources for this thesis. The ATC's official, annually updated *Thru Hikers Companion* is also made available. As hikers enter the lounge they pass by enlarged photos of early path-breaking thru-hikers such as Earl Shaffer and Emma "Grandma" Gatewood. One wall of the lounge is devoted pictures and letters from past thru-hikers. Dating back to 1979, photos of thru-hikers who passed through Harper's Ferry act as a form of documentation and are shelved in the lounge as well.

The lounge is a space set aside for hikers generally. However, when a thru-hiker (or more likely these days a group of thru-hikers) arrives, there is little debate over for whom the lounge is really meant. When thru-hikers reach the hiker's lounge they leave their packs wherever they find suitable. They often sign the trail register waiting there

for them and leave messages for cohorts yet to reach Harper's Ferry. During the summer you can often find the most recent group to pass through sharing a couch, discussing the parts of the trail they have already covered, and speculating about the upcoming terrain. Some make plans to indulge in "town food." Others arrange for a place to stay the night, do laundry, and shower. Some hikers make their stay shorter than others, wasting little time before heading back to the AT. Often, day-visitors join the thru-hikers in the lounge to pose the standard questions. Some queries are asked in bewilderment, some reverently. How far? How long? Why? No one complains about the obvious stench of body odor.

Adjacent to the lounge there is a large walk-in closet big enough that it acts as an office. There the ATC keeps its unofficial archive on thru-hikers, dating all the way back to a report Earl Shaffer submitted in 1948 as evidence of his feat. Letters to and from the ATC, various trail reports offered by thru-hikers, and newspaper clippings found in that closet yielded a wealth of information for this thesis. After a single box designated for the time span of 1948 to 1972, there is a box designated with information on every annual class of thru-hikers from 1973 onward. In fact, the ATC has a folder for every known person to hike the entire AT. At the ATC thru-hikers are much more than a mere esoteric novelty.

As I sat in the hiker's lounge sifting through letters and articles related to early thru-hikers in the company of contemporary thru-hikers I felt sort of like the long-distance-trekkers. I was hanging out in the lounge, taking advantage of the free coffee, tired and in the midst of a prolonged, individualized endeavor which I engaged in by my own volition. As a white male of twenty-five I also fell into the demographic of most

thru-hikers. Seventy-five percent of hikers who have reported covering the AT in its entirety identify as male and judging by the ATC's photo collection of thru-hikers almost all of them are white.⁴ Nevertheless, though we would speak briefly there seemed to be a divide between me and the other hikers in the lounge. Part of it was due to my position as a historian observing his subjects. But part of it also was that my longest hike had been one tenth the distance AT thru-hikers travel. I can only imagine what it is like to have hiked a thousand miles and still not have reached the halfway point yet. In truth, although I have a taste for their obsession, as I read about the existential explanations for why thru-hikers took to the AT, I was a historian first and foremost, inevitably questioning the context, dominant values, and beliefs that would make a person want to hike two-thousand miles in the first place.

The majority of thru-hikers were influenced by a historically evolving dichotomy that placed wilderness and civilization on opposite ends of the spectrum of human control. By going to seemingly wild nature for prolonged periods of time thru-hikers were enabled to have what they deemed to be authentic experiences. On the AT they asked questions about who they really were, what was really important. They achieved a sense of personal meaning and accomplishment. Indeed, what better way to experience self-sufficiency and personal meaning than to engage by choice in an arduous six-month-long journey where all one needs is herself or himself and what they carry on their back?⁵ To access the world fully and authentically thru-hikers believed they had to be fully immersed in it. To thru-hikers society seemed to stymie the intrinsic and all-encompassing experience for which they aimed. Meanwhile, a simple but strenuous life

afoot that provided intimacy with wilderness appeared to be a means to an authentic engagement with the world.

Simply going to wilderness, however, was not the most important facet to the emergence of thru-hiking on the AT. More broadly, and more accurately, existential immersion by one's own volition was the fundamental motivator. As this thesis will show, there are reasons to explain why wilderness in general and the AT in particular seemed an ideal means for this experience. Yet the wilderness idea acted as a tool. The end was an all-encompassing mode of living where personal agency ruled. The freedom to thru-hike undergirds any freedom found on a thru-hike. As esoteric as a thru-hike might seem, as engrossed as thru-hikers might be, in many ways what they were doing was simply another recreational pursuit of a privileged class. For better or worse the hike is an unquestionably self-centered activity born of an increasingly self-center society.

The idea of wilderness certainly has been deeply entrenched and influential in the thinking of early thru-hikers. Yet, in the relationship between wilderness, civilization, recreation, and personal authenticity, a clear-cut dichotomy that places civilization and wilderness on opposite ends of a spectrum is intellectually insufficient.⁶ While I cannot help wondering who is really more in touch with the way things are -- those immersed in the endeavor or those who watch and try to analyze it from a distance -- I believe any critical analysis into the origins and emergence of thru-hiking on the AT calls for a refusal to settle for viewing civilization and wilderness as separate entities. In truth, they can never exist apart. For all the talk of wilderness throughout this inquiry, civilization will be present at every turn. Thru-hiking is a form recreation that should be understood as functioning within and as a part of civilization.

As with those who went to wilderness for recreation in earlier eras and as with disciples of new age religions, inhabitants of communes, and enthusiasts of the fitness boom during the 1970s, the eventual emergence of thru-hiker during the seventies owes its greatest debt to the structure and values of the civilization that brought it about. The desire for self-actualization that spurred mass thru-hiking was brought about by specific historical contexts. By seeing themselves in individualistic terms, by focusing on changes in themselves and on their own needs and desires, thru-hikers displayed the predominant values of the society they from which they aimed to separate. While the AT provided a place for a distinct type of recreation, thru-hikers trod a human-made trail with strategically placed markers, carrying the most innovative camping equipment money could buy, and they have done so for culturally inculcated reasons. Every vacation must come to an end and no matter how far into the woods thru-hikers traveled, no matter how engrossed with the experience of wilderness they became, thru-hikers could never leave civilization entirely behind.

I will begin in the first chapter with a brief history of the concept of wilderness in American minds. It will explain how wilderness transformed from a place of antipathy to a site of idealized recreation. This section primarily focuses on wilderness as it was understood and implemented in the northeastern United States, where America's first hiking trails were built.

Chapter two will turn to the conception and construction of the AT itself. This section will elucidate the forces that led to the trail's creation. It will also show how the trail became a space meant for temporary and individualized relief from modern industrial society.

The third chapter will be a historical account of the first thru-hikers. It will explain what motivated early thru-hikers and describe how ultra-long-distance treks evolved in trail blazers' minds. From an inappropriate "stunt" that did not align with the Appalachian Trail's anti-modern recreational purposes, thru-hikes eventually became acceptable and commendable to the organization that oversaw the AT.

The fourth chapter will set the stage for the 1970s thru-hiker surge. It will delve into the social and cultural forces behind the decade's backpacking boom that flooded the AT with a horde of new hikers. It will show how a new focus on individualism and self-sufficiency, along with advances in technology and changing wilderness ideals, led Americans to go-back-to-nature for recreation in unprecedented numbers.

The fifth chapter will discuss the intentions and motivations of 1970s thru-hikers who suddenly took to the Appalachian Trail in record numbers. This chapter will explain what thru-hikers believed they were achieving. Moreover, the chapter will illustrate how a thru-hike provided an arena that could fulfill the existential desires of many 1970s Americans.

The sixth and final chapter will take a philosophical turn. To explain why the emergence of thru-hiking occurred I will rely heavily on thru-hikers descriptions of their own experiences. This final chapter offers an explanation as to how the lived experience of traversing a wilderness trail can come about. Although a thru-hike is ripe with constructed conventions and technologies, the adoption of proper context and exertion of an individual willingness may make the experience of traveling through the world "free" from human civilization a real possibility for hikers.

Chapter One

From Wilderness to Walkway – The Changing Idea of Wilderness

The history of hiking and creation of hiking trails in the United States has been tethered to the history of American ideas about civilization and wilderness. Neither civilization nor wilderness is a static entity but exists in tandem in American imaginations. In fact, both are socially-constructed concepts that are highly influenced by historical context and geographic location. Moreover, understandings of wilderness have been contingent on understandings of society. Americans cannot discuss the concept of wilderness without implicating the concept of civilization, and vice versa. As environmental historian Paul Sutter has recently argued, the meaning of wilderness has been “a product of intellectual engagement with specific circumstances.”¹ Fellow environmental scholar William Cronon notes, “Far from being a place on earth that stands apart from humanity,” as wilderness is usually thought of, wilderness “is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures and very particular moments in human history.”² The meanings Americans have attributed to the wild have always been dynamic concepts that shed light on American notions of civil society as well.

American understandings of civilization and wilderness have shaped the construction and development of the Appalachian Trail (AT), a 2,000 mile-plus walkway built in the middle of the twentieth century and known today as “primarily a wilderness foot trail” meant to “preserve and restore the natural environment of the trail and its adjacent lands.”³ While the ways in which Americans have related to their nation’s wild lands has never been unanimous, over time several themes have played out. From

outright antagonism during the colonial era to the influences of romanticism and transcendentalism between the Revolution and the Civil War, from calls for efficient use of resources by conservationists to the anti-economic agenda of preservationists, as the nation developed toward modernity the meaning of civilization and wilderness in American lives have proven malleable. The realization of the AT likewise reveals the dynamics behind the changing relationship between the idea of pristine wilderness and civilized progress.

An Endless Wilderness

Perhaps the most comprehensive account of how wilderness has been understood in American civilization is Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*.⁴ In his classic account, Nash depicts American perceptions drastically transformed over time. In essence, wilderness in America has historically been recognized as the antithesis of society, as Nash puts it, "[as] the antipode of civilization." As American civilization overwhelmed untamed lands, over time wilderness and wilderness appreciation developed an inverse relationship. The less acreage that remained uncivilized and thus wild, the harder Americans have fought to preserve it. From early colonization to industrialization and modernity, wilderness in American minds transformed from an object of fear to be conquered, controlled, and commodified, into a fragile artifact to be preserved, appreciated, and even venerated.⁵ The forces that blazed the AT were undoubtedly influenced by this evolutionary pattern of thought.

Early European explorers and American colonialists often saw the wilderness as a dark, sinister, dangerous place. In one of the first European encounters with the White Mountains, the eventual epicenter of Northeastern hiking, the English traveler John

Josselyn depicted the “hills northward” as “daunting terrible.” To Josselyn the Whites were “full of rocking hills, as thick as Mole-hills” and pejoratively “cloathed [sic] with infinite thick woods.”⁶ Indeed, in the seventeenth century mountains were no place for recreation or social reclamation projects.

Aligned with older European views, for those in the colonial period who made their homes on the frontiers of the “New World” the “infinite” woods presented both an obstacle to settlement and a potential supply of seemingly inexhaustible resources. In truth, to survive colonists and pioneers had to bring some semblance of control to the alien lands they encountered. Their adverse relationship with the wild, even if latent, had tangible social benefits. Harkening back to a biblical commandment, early settlers set out nobly to “subdue” the earth for the good of God and themselves.⁷

The land use policies colonials implemented had as much to do with the culture they transported from Europe as they did with mere survival. William Cronon has deftly chronicled the effects European ideas had on the landscape of New England. The first Europeans came to the region in the 1500s (the Florentine navigator and explore Francis Verrazano is the first known, arriving in 1524). The Pilgrims began settling Massachusetts beginning in the 1620s—followed quickly by other religious and social groups. The colonists who made New England their home saw the vast forests and lands as resources wasted. To them, nomadic Native Americans who failed to fix their homes in a single region squandered the abundance around them. Though their way of life had worked for hundreds if not thousands of years, and would prove to have benefits unforeseen by Europeans settlers, early Americans conceived the Natives as poverty-stricken vagabonds. On notions of wealth, the natives and the colonials certainly

differed. To the colonists land not put to the most efficient and productive use was tantamount to sin. Indeed, New England's Puritan settlers attributed the natives' supposed squandering of resources as immoral, a product of laziness.⁸

With faith that human intervention was God's will and that they knew the best way to intervene, settlers stretched Europe's economy across the Atlantic. In the presence of the settlers, New England and its natural resources became commodities. With an eye for market value, North America's new inhabitants hunted, downed timber, and cultivated land based on European notions of need and scarcity. Perhaps the fundamental assumption undergirding New England's transformation was the settlers' sincere belief that the "New World's" abundance was inexhaustible. Especially compared to the "Old World," New England's woods, fish, and other forms of wildlife appeared so plentiful they might as well have been limitless. As the Europeans claimed property (which was free to claim because the natives failed to use it properly), delineated land, and put it to what they deemed its most constructive usage, they anticipated profit with little foresight.⁹

The resources of the New World were, of course, finite and notions that they were infinite had consequences. As Cronon comments, "ecological abundance and economic prodigality went hand in hand: the people of plenty were a people of waste." By 1800 soil used for cultivation had lost essential nutrients. Vast deforestation forced settlers to travel further and further away from their homes for timber and, as Cronon speculates, likely led to erratic weather patterns. Forests that still stood had been changed by animal grazing. Oaks and white pines had disappeared and cedar became scarce. Animal life also diminished, "beaver, deer, bear, turkey wolf, and others had vanished." It was clear

even as early as 1800 that “capitalism and environmental degradation went hand and hand.” It is important to reiterate that the *Changes in the Land* Cronon depicts were not necessarily the result of human civilization. Native Americans inhabited New England long before the Europeans arrived. Indeed, the abstract concept of a commodity as well as the notion that an individual could own land were both ideas not present in New England before the 1500s and certainly not prevalent until the 1600s. The changes that occurred were a product of the specific ideas and beliefs the European colonialists had brought with them.¹⁰

Intentions to civilize unused lands, the drive of capitalism, and the belief that the land’s resources were inexhaustible would expand with the American frontier. Americans viewed themselves as bringing the chaotic under control--and they defined control as progress. Visiting from France where wilderness and natural resources were not nearly as plentiful, in his famed *Democracy in America* (1835) Alexis de Tocqueville commented on American relationships with their natural surroundings. “In Europe,” he wrote, “people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them: they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature, and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests which surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet ... [Americans] march across these wilds – drying swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature.”¹¹ What Tocqueville found during his nine month stay in 1831 was indicative of what most American pioneers in fact felt. As Nash portrays, “anxious to justify independence with success, the conquest of wilderness bolstered the national ego.” To Americans self-conscious about their new nation’s role in the world, “in the vocabulary of material progress wilderness had meaning only as

obstacle.”¹² In antebellum America, building a walking trail through the woods the length of the East Coast would have seemed, to most citizens, utterly ludicrous.

Experiencing the Sublime

Nevertheless, in the mid-nineteenth century, America’s relationship to wild lands was not always so straightforward. Pioneer antipathy certainly persisted but especially among the well-read (meaning well-off) classes, romantic European notions of nature began to become more influential. As Sutter, Cronon, and Nash each suggests, social and cultural forces have held significant sway over how American’s viewed natural landscapes. Literary scholar Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s analysis of the rise of romanticism in England confirms the notion that ideas about nature have been socially constructed. In Nicolson’s study of the changing depiction of mountains from “ugly” and “disfigured” to “splendid” and “glorious,” she asserts that early romantic conceptions of nature “result[ed] ... in the most profound revolution of thought that has ever occurred.” As Nicolson claims, “[w]hat men see in Nature is a result of what they have been taught to see-- lessons they have learned in school, doctrines they have heard in church, books they have read.” Indeed, during the 1700s and 1800s greater understandings in theology, philosophy, geology, and astronomy that emerged from the Enlightenment changed how many English poets and artists looked upon mountains.¹³ Their work rubbed off in Europe and, in due course, made waves in America.

European romantics who visited or moved to America embraced the unknown and mysterious aspects of wilderness, aspects most pioneers feared. In fact, notions that nature’s vast chaotic scenery could be “sublime”¹⁴ and its irregularities “picturesque”¹⁵ gained traction even before the American Revolution, reaching an apex between the

1830s and 1870s. While testimonials to the beauties of America's wild lands often came from the pens of European vacationers, many American writers, scientists, artists, and gentlemen--who did not experience wilderness as pioneers did--also came to express reverence for their nation's uncivilized regions. Though it would be inaccurate to think this was in any way the dominant trend among the masses, at times even some pioneers found themselves falling prey to romantic reactions.¹⁶

The language of the sublime and picturesque natural world proved helpful to nationalists in search of distinctive American attributes. The conquest of nature remained an important part of American national pride but paeans to spectacular wilderness became increasingly popular in the national literature. To pioneers who actually lived on society's boundaries, wilderness continued to be an unwanted hindrance in need of subjugation. Yet, for a nation with such short history, nascent traditions, and comparatively weak literary and artistic achievements, living near the boundaries of untamed lands seemed to set Americans apart from their European brethren. For American artists and intellectuals looking to validate their nation's exceptional role in the world through claims of unique cultural attributes, wilderness appreciation became something worth propagating. As artistic depictions of mountains, forest, rivers, and lakes spread, wilderness became an acceptable source of admiration for American nationalists.¹⁷

The painter Thomas Cole, creator of the popular Hudson River School, typified the use of artistry and the romantic lexicon for nationalistic purposes. He did not have the temples and cathedrals that European painters often used for inspiration. Instead, he willingly turned to producing vast and intricate natural landscapes that he dutifully

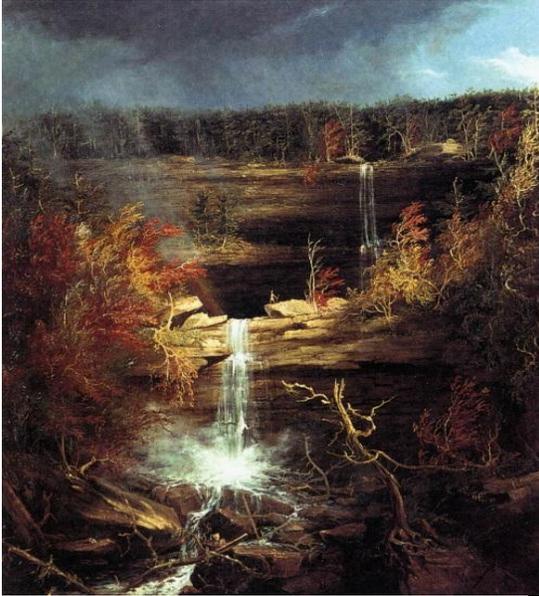


Figure 1: Cole's 1826 "Falls of Kaaterskill"

purported could only be found in America.

In his art, civilization's influences were often completely absent. When present, miniature human profiles were barely visible overwhelmed by the spectacular landscapes surrounding them (see Figure 1).¹⁸

"Remarkable for their picturesqueness and truly American character," Cole described almost systematically the uniqueness of

American rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, and skies in an 1836 essay. In the "mountains of New Hampshire" for instance, where America's first hiking trails would be laid, Cole wondered at "a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent" together in one location. In the prose of nationalism he affirmed that "although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's ... inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for [although] American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European ... it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe."¹⁹

Before he wrote his 1836 essay, Cole had spent time overseas and undoubtedly was impacted by those "circumstances" with which Europeans found value. Indeed, historians have noted that after returning from Europe Cole's relationship with nature became somewhat more ambiguous. Although Cole passionately called for recognition of the land's unique natural beauty, he showed little of what later might be called "preservationist" intentions. Indeed, he tellingly concluded his essay by acknowledging, "[a]nother generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is

called improvement ... [But] such is the road society has to travel.” He anticipated “where the wolf [now] roams, the plough shall glisten.” Obviously referring to European architecture he averred, “[o]n the gray crag shall rise temple and tower.” Although he maintained enthusiasm for the splendor of nature, Cole seemed to have had little inkling of the sentiments that would eventually motivate many supporters of outdoor recreation. Certainly, this was in part due to the time in which he lived. His premature death in 1848 prevented him from experiencing the burgeoning industrialism and the rise of urbanization with which the later founders of the AT, as well as other social thinkers, contended early in the twentieth century. It is interesting nonetheless to note Cole’s ultimately noncommittal stance on wilderness, especially because of his intense romantic feelings toward it. Cole did not foresee the sublime and picturesque landscapes he painted being saved for later generations in any literal sense. Perhaps glorifying his own role, for future generations Cole merely “urged” that “the importance of cultivating a taste for scenery ... not be forgotten.”²⁰

Even if nineteenth-century romantics fell short of feelings that they had an obligation to maintain wilderness as it was, a stance which twentieth-century conservationists and preservationists often took, they opened the door for wilderness appreciation. As Cole painted, writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, transcendental philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and other intellectuals expounded the sublimity of nature through their respective mediums. As hiking historians Laura and Guy Waterman have noted, the romantics laid “the seeds of the ... Mount Washington Cog Rail--and eventually the Appalachian Trail and the Appalachian Mountain Club hut system [which the AT traverses].” Especially in the North-East, where conquest of

wilderness was the most comprehensive, wilderness became a fanciful attraction. In mid-century New Hampshire, the once “infinite” forests that surrounded the White Mountains had been cleared to an extent not seen before or since. For local residents, summer tourists, and other New Englanders with access to free time and transportation, the remaining wilderness of the Whites became a hub of mountain tourism.²¹

One person who went to the White Mountains, swept up by these changes in perception, was a young pastor named Thomas Starr King. Known for his powerful voice and eloquent speech, at the age of twenty-four King had been commissioned to lead Hollis Street Unitarian Church in Boston. The following summer he visited the White Mountains for the first time, where he would return every summer for the next ten years.²² At the height of antebellum mountain tourism, his text, *The White Hills* (1859), called on others to join him at his beloved mountain range. Among other things, King’s best-seller offered advice on how to appreciate mountains and how to comprehend their religious meanings. Combining the romantic with the religious King avowed, “[t]he great mountains rise in the landscape as heroes and prophets in history, ennobled by what they have given, sublime in the expression of struggle and pain.” He preached that “[u]pon the mountains is written the law, and in their grandeur is displayed the fulfillment of it, that perfection comes through suffering.” King, like Cole and other romantics, had been taken aback by the seeming sublime qualities of the Whites. Yet, also in the romantic vein, King did not purport the seemingly inevitable changes wrought by civilization upon pristine lands to necessarily be bad. Looking upon Pliny Ridge, King observed “the wilderness being displaced by smiling farms.” In a trip to the village of Gorham, he commented that “Nature had plainly been longing for the necessity of ...

agriculture.”²³ Romantics such as Cole and King helped lay the ground work for positive feelings toward wilderness in America, and similarly to wilderness advocates to follow, they saw the benefits in both civilized and uncivilized lands. They did not, however, question the spread of civilization at the expense of wilderness to the extent that later thinkers would.

Walking in the Wild

Transcendental philosophers took romantic notions further. Positing interaction with wilderness as essential to morality and seeing natural reality to the most lucid extent, they came to question the breadth of new technological advances and materialistic driven production in ways earlier romantics had not. By no means renowned in his own time, the most influential transcendentalist was Henry David Thoreau. His ideas directly impacted Benton MacKaye’s conception of the AT. In many ways Thoreau’s thinking permeated the AT’s actual construction as well. Many early long distance hikers literally and metaphorically carried Thoreau with them.²⁴ It could be argued, whether they knew it or not, that anyone who has set out to thru-hike the AT has become, in some sense, a disciple of Thoreau.²⁵

Thoreau lived in New England in the mid-nineteenth century when 60 percent of the region’s forests had been converted into farmer’s fields, often surrounded by fences. Numerous wild species that had once been plentiful in the region no longer roamed the land. The countryside that had once been considered untamable and endless had been domesticated.²⁶ As a transcendentalist, Thoreau believed his best opportunities to see truth, witness the highest possible reality, and even to converse with God could be found through experiences with nature. For Thoreau these changes must have been

disconcerting. “When I consider that nobler animals have been exterminated here – the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverene (sic), wolf, bear, moose, deer, the beaver, the turkey, etc. etc.--I cannot but feel as if I live in a tamed ... emasculated country,” Thoreau lamented in 1856. Thoreau was by no means the first to notice the differences that two centuries of agriculture and human population growth had wrought in New England. He was, however, one of first to ardently look at these differences in a negative light.²⁷

As irked as he was by the effects of agriculture, witnessing the spread of factories, intrusion of railroads, and the influences of what he called “the commercial spirit” brought even greater frustration. Believing natural objects--looked upon correctly--could yield spiritual truths, Thoreau urged people to spend time in untamed lands. He felt that people needed contact with wilderness to stimulate intellectual thought, to find inspiration, and to build moral strength. Wilderness was a tool that provided a means to deliberate and simplistic living, elucidating life’s true necessities.²⁸

To gain such experiences, moreover, Thoreau asserted people ought to walk. In 1851 in his hometown of Concord, Thoreau publicly announced he wished to “speak a word for Nature.” In the presentation that would later be published as the essay “Walking” Thoreau asserted, “I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least--and it is commonly more than that--sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely freed from all worldly engagement.” It was by walking in the woods that Thoreau claimed he was enabled to “shake off the village,” “forget about ... morning occupations and ... obligations to society.” As if thinking out loud during one of his walks, he remarked, “Man and his affairs, church and state and school, trade and commerce, manufacturing and agriculture, even politics--the most

alarming of all--I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape.”²⁹ The notion that walking through the woods could alter one’s perception would become fundamental to Benton MacKaye’s conception of the AT seventy years later.

Walking, after all, was the only way Thoreau could enter wilderness without bringing society to some degree (or to the least degree) with him. In his 1851 lecture, the dichotomy between civilized and uncivilized was evident. This dichotomy was, of course, nothing new. What was so novel and striking about Thoreau’s contribution to the discourse about wilderness and civilization was where goodness and malevolence seemed to reside. “Hope for the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities but in the impervious and quaking swamps,” he averred. “If it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden ever human art contrived, or else the dismal swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp.” The direction Thoreau wanted to walk was unequivocal, toward the wild away from the settled. “Toward Oregon and not toward Europe,” the transcendental sage shouted. With skilled prose Thoreau made claims that would echo over the Appalachian Mountain Range in years to come. “All good things are wild and free,” he preached. “Give me the ocean, the desert, the wilderness!,” he pleaded. In what in all probability sounded preposterous to his listeners in Concord he professed, “[i]n wildness is the preservation of the world.”³⁰

The ways in which Thoreau’s thinking influenced the founders and hikers of the AT did not stop with the nexus of wilderness, walking, and moral vitality. Indeed, a compressive description of the encounter between Thoreau, American trailblazers, and trail walkers will hardly reach full approach here. Nevertheless, one other specific notion

worth mentioning is Thoreau's conception of a balanced individual. Thoreau did not spurn the technologies of the civilized world completely. Nor did he find in his own travels the wild to always be as pristine and enlightening an experience as he portrayed in "Walking." Ideally, he envisioned people drawing on positive aspects of both the wild and civilized worlds. With a foot in both realms he hoped for people to make the most of civilization's advantages without suffering from the disadvantages he believed contact with nature might remedy. The best way to get the most out of the refined, as Thoreau saw it, was to maintain constant contact with the wild. As Nash has noted, Thoreau "rejoiced in the extremes ... by keeping a foot in each [he] believed he could extract the best of both."³¹

Interestingly, it was in the woods of Maine during a failed attempt to summit Mount Katahdin, a peak that nearly a century later would become the north terminus of the AT, that Thoreau experienced a defining moment in his thinking. In 1846, after braving a night in the rain, Thoreau neared the summit of Katahdin. "Deep in the hostel ranks of the cloud" with "the cloud line rising and falling with the wind's intensity" he clung the mountain's rocks. To Thoreau, Katahdin appeared "vast and titanic, such as man never inhabits." Thoreau remembered that on the peak he was "more lone than you can imagine." Indeed, he discovered no transcendental insights in such a place. "There is less substantial thought and fair understanding in him ... His reason is dispersed and shadowy ... inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of his divine faculty;" "She [Nature] does not smile on him as in the plains," Thoreau admitted. "She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you," he concluded.³² Pure wilderness had proven equally as dangerous

as pure civilization. Thus Thoreau reasoned it was the best of both and not all of one that was needed for a well-lived and deliberate life. It seems somewhat providential that on the ridge that transformed Thoreau's thinking about the individual would one day be on it a walking trail conceived by an individual who piggy-backed on Thoreau's ideas about wilderness and applied them to community.

Modernization

In Thoreau's own time his writings and lectures received limited attention. While he lived wilderness appreciation remained an esoteric phenomenon. A slow transformation, however, had begun. In time, Thoreau would become a prophet for advocates of wilderness experience such as Benton MacKaye, the originator of the idea for the Appalachian Trail. By 1921, when MacKaye first proposed the Appalachian Trail, the American landscape had drastically changed from Thoreau's time, let alone from the colonial era. In the midst of rapid industrialization and urbanization, more than half the nation's population lived in urban centers. Fearful, pioneer-like encounters with wilderness were almost entirely a thing of the past. As one historian has put it, "self-sufficiency at the home gave way to mass production."³³ Food, clothes, and other essentials were easily purchased at department and grocery stores, instead of hunted for or cultivated.

Moreover, where Thoreau had been ignored, writers who followed in his wake such as John Muir gained national attention and support for staunch preservationist stances. By the beginning of the twentieth century, though Gifford Pinchot's philosophy of efficient use enjoyed a devoted conservationist following that included President Theodore Roosevelt, Thoreau's preservationist philosophy experienced increasing

mainstream support. In fact, Roosevelt would prove in presidential practice to harbor both preservationist and conservationist inclinations. Roosevelt's legacy included forming 149 million acres of national forests, five national parks, and 51 federal wildlife preserves. Although preservationists and conservationists did not agree on how the nation's natural resources and wild lands ought best to be utilized, both factions recognized the days of bottomless consumption and an endless frontier were over. Industry transformed how Americans lived and how they viewed their society—and thus how they perceived their wild places.³⁴

Especially within the congested cities, deteriorating living conditions brought the benevolence of progress into question. Inevitably, how Americans viewed what was left of their nation's so called wilderness changed as well. The effects of industrialization can hardly be understated. In 1800, six percent of the population lived in urban settings. By 1920 over 54 million people--more than half of the country--made cities their homes. New machineries and technologies replaced handcrafts and human muscles. With mass production advancing, by the 1880s manufactured and processed goods exceeded the value of agricultural products for the first time. Factories running on coal (and later electricity) were built in population centers and (along with trains) made coal the nation's leading source of energy. Steel, iron, lumber, and petroleum were the raw materials of unprecedented economic growth. The United States was becoming a global economic power. The costs of economic success has been well-documented; overcrowded tenements, congested traffic, smoke-filled skies and lungs, waste-filled streets, polluted water, and roaring factory noise. Nevertheless, although the physical conditions of the

cities worsened, to most Americans--at first--such changes were simply the price of progress.³⁵

The cities had been meant, as the urban historian Martin Melosi has posited, to “put in order what was chaotic in nature.” From the economic standpoint of those at the head of production, there was indeed an extraordinary management of resources taking place. Nevertheless, expectations that moving from an agricultural economy to prospering industrial one would be in the best interest of the majority proved to be naïve at best. At the time, few possessed the broad environmental perspective necessary to anticipate or deal with the side effects modernization wrought. Though sewage-strewn streets, rank air, and contaminated water were at first deemed sufferable the consequences of this pollution--cholera, yellow fever, typhoid fever, dysentery, and rising infant mortality rates--eventually placed the price of economic prosperity into question.³⁶

Meanwhile, the American wilderness had been for all intents and purposes, subdued. Instead of being overwhelmed by the chaos of the wild, the view from the city streets made untamed nature appear a much more sensible state of affairs. Many came to the realization that Thoreau had been right--too much civilization and too little nature was problematic. Nearing the turn of the twentieth century, Fredrick Jackson Turner’s famous essays on the past and future of the American republic harkened back to wilderness as a unique character-building attribute in the national experience. Turner, noting wilderness was nearly extinct, pessimistically wondered whether Americans would be able maintain their independent spirit without the “free lands which ... served to reinforce the democratic influences” of the once new nation. According to Turner,

“the very fact of wilderness appealed to man’s struggle for a higher type of society.” Without it, the frontier historian wondered if the struggle for progress would continue.³⁷

As Roderick Nash has observed, “as the antipode of civilization, of cities, and of machines, wilderness could be associated with the virtues these entities lacked.” Many still devoted to urbanization and industrialization worked to build parks, playgrounds, and promote participation in sports to cultivate the energies supposedly lost when the frontier was finally vanquished. Others looked more directly to “nature” for solutions to the negative ramification of industry. The Boy Scouts and summer camps, for instance, became exceedingly popular remedies for middle and upper class families. Theodore Roosevelt famously supported the “strenuous life” by promoting preservation initiatives, advocating that they would provide young Americans a place to experience frontier-like conditions. The minds of many social thinkers had shifted. Civilization, though progressive, had previously unforeseen ramifications. However, many reasoned that the vitality lost in the move to the cities could be re-discovered by going back to nature, one way or another.³⁸ As the assets of civilization became more ambiguous, wilderness appreciation reached a standard never before seen.

Early Hikers

From the 1820s to the 1920s, the center of American industrialization and urbanization was the Northeast. In New England, 296 cities contained 75 percent of region’s population and 81 percent of manufacturing establishments. Slightly southward, New York City was the most populated urban area in the nation. There, in the region that had been on the frontier of change from the start, the first trails for recreational hiking were blazed.³⁹

Before the Civil War tourists with romantic and transcendentalist inclinations who visited the mountains and woods of New England and New York were mainly well-off Northeasterners. They valued the views from the ridge tops and forests, but readily traveled the cog rail up to the summit of Mount Washington (the highest point in New Hampshire's White Mountains) to take in the scenery of the vast, untouched surroundings. Few among them were interested in actually climbing over the rocky granite that they wished to behold. The sublime was an experience that could be undertaken with comparable ease via the tourist train. While Mount Washington's summit could be considerably crowded, nearby peaks with similar vistas but no trains to the top were vacant.⁴⁰

After the Civil War, American sentiments, in the midst of a rising industrial economy, began to change. Americans seemed to have a more rational mindset, leaving the likes of romanticism and transcendentalism behind. Yet what was economically sound had proven to be, potentially, ecologically disastrous. Leaving cities for wilderness renewal through outdoor recreation began to make sense to many Americans. Scientists and social thinkers endorsed the idea that humans needed vacations from the intense pressures of modernity.⁴¹

Businessmen, ministers, and scholars with free time began to travel to upscale hotels and resorts that sprang up in the mountains as summer retreats away from the hustle of the city. Closer to the cities, pedestrianism became a popular past time, often leading recreational walkers--as Thoreau had once envisioned--into nearby hills for refreshment. Taking tours in the mountains became a popular activity on college campuses as well. At the nation's elite universities groups from Brown, Harvard, Yale,

and Dartmouth regularly went on weeklong excursions in the wilderness, though these trips quickly diminished with the rise of modern sports, baseball and football, on campuses. Hiking clubs soon began to form, especially in the Northeast. The Fresh Air Club in the 1870s and 1880s attracted men from New York City's multiple athletic clubs. The White Mountain Club of Maine formed in the 1870s, a collective that would eventually be absorbed by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), which formed in 1876. A physics professor from MIT recruited other Boston area hikers to start the original club. Starting with 92 members, before the turn of the twentieth century over 1,000 men (it was a male only club) had joined.⁴²

The AMC, still functioning to this day, was the most prodigious club of the era. Members worked to place registers on mountains summits, make scientific observations, draw maps, produce a journal, and publish guide books. They planned excursions to well-known areas that at times drew hundreds of participants. In other instances, smaller groups from the club organized explorations into places yet unmapped. Among their primary objectives was to "improve" the areas where they wished to venture afoot. Aside from a single anomaly from the 1850s, these improvements eventually constituted one of the first linked systems of hiking trails ever built. In the Adirondacks of New York and the woods of Maine, other groups joined the trail-building boom.⁴³

Before the rise of automobiles these trails were built in loops around popular vacation centers. Hikers needed to be able to finish where they started. The White Mountains of New Hampshire were not connected to the Green Mountains of Vermont. Within the Whites the trails around the Franconia and Presidential Ranges were isolated from each other. Likewise, in Massachusetts, Mount Greylock and Mount Everett had

extensive trails but no connecting path allowing hikers to travel from one trail system to the other. When cars became widely accessible, traveling to distant trailheads became much easier. Trail builders soon began to connect previously disparate clusters of the wilderness walkways. Famously, in 1910 James P. Taylor, the founder of the Green Mountain Club (GMC) of Vermont, presented the idea of a trail which would run the length of his state. The schoolmaster who was popular for sponsoring walks to the Greens presented a map to avid hikers four years later with a proposed trail running from Quebec to New York City. In 1916, Taylor, along with Allen Chamberlain, president of the AMC, and Philip Ayers, a New Hampshire forester, joined forces to create the New England Trail Conference (NETC). They aimed, as Ayers stated, for “all of the clubs [to try] to bring their trails into a general system so that one may walk from the Palisades in New York to Katahdin in Maine, through the Green Mountains in Vermont to the White Mountains in New Hampshire.”⁴⁴ In a land where the woods and mountains had once been associated with malice and fear, the sport of backpacking had emerged.

“A Manufactured Wilderness”

Overtime, with changes in context, understanding of wilderness also changed. In doing so, wilderness became less wild. American began to desire a reprieve from society, but what that reprieve entailed was nevertheless socially driven. Wilderness had not just gone from negative to positive. It had gone from endlessly uncontrolled to human-constructed walkways. Along such a paths huts to rest at, blazes to follow, delineated trailheads with which to start and stop a venture, and the best camping equipment civilization’s technologies had to offer, were all welcomed. As Abigail A.

Slyck put it in describing the rise of summer camps, Americans had gone from fearing wilderness to loving “a manufactured wilderness.”⁴⁵

Even as Americans began to appreciate the so called wild for intrinsic purposes (as preservationists called for), they could not help but make good use of it (as conservationists called for). As Aldo Leopold wrote in 1925, “wilderness is a resource, not only in the physical sense of the raw materials it contains, but also in the sense of a distinctive environment, which may, if rightly used, yield certain social values.”⁴⁶ Such a use of wilderness could only be conceived as a space where human intervention was welcomed. As Leopold stated, the key was to intervene “rightly.”

Into this new world where Thoreau’s ideas about walking, wilderness, and human recreation had come to fruition in a widening system of woodland trails, came in the early 1920s a hiker, forester, preservationist, and political radical named Benton MacKaye. MacKaye envisioned a grand new trail that would transect the nation from south to north. Like Thoreau seven decades earlier, MacKaye dreamed of a footpath through the forest where hikers could see “how little space they [the accoutrement of civilization] occupy in the landscape”—as Thoreau once put the matter.⁴⁷ And like his contemporary Aldo Leopold, MacKaye believed, if properly constructed, wilderness could become a vital resource managed and utilized for the sake the nation. From these ideals, in the midst of modernity, MacKaye’s vision of the Appalachian Trail arose.

Chapter Two

From Social Rearrangement to Personal Recreation – Benton MacKaye’s Vision and the Actual Appalachian Trail

“The Appalachian Trail should be placed in public hands and become the site for a Barbarian Utopia.” – Benton MacKaye, 1927.¹

“The Appalachian Trail ... is a footpath for hikers in the Appalachian Mountains, extending from Maine to Georgia.” – Myron Avery, 1930.²

When Benton MacKaye publicly proposed the AT in 1921, earlier romantic and transcendental persuasions had evolved towards contemporary notions that wilderness was a source of human vitality. With seeds planted by the romantics, the support of more recent transcendental philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau, and the economic and social effects of industrialization and urbanization well underway, MacKaye’s seemingly bold proposal to blaze a trail the length of the Appalachians was made right on schedule. Indeed, before the 1920s backcountry hiking and long distance trail building already had precedents, especially within certain areas of the Northeast. In fact, many social planners throughout the country felt the best way to respond to anxieties arising from industrialization was to promote physical activity in the outdoors. For many progressive thinkers, sports served as a vital facet in their plans to insure a healthy future for the American republic.³ The combination of positive feelings toward wilderness and toward sport made the construction of a 2,000-mile-long hiking trail a legitimate possibility.

In truth, however, the trail as MacKaye originally envisioned it never fully materialized. Accounts that depict the construction of the AT as a realization of what MacKaye imagined are – at least to some extent – the products of selective memory. What MacKaye actually proposed was more radical than what most physical activity

promulgators, park and playground builders, or hiking enthusiasts had in mind.

Following in the tradition of Thoreau, MacKaye saw the AT as a means for rearranging American society through extended contact with nature. He believed that living near the wilderness – or a “primeval environment” as MacKaye called it – would broaden public perspectives about the valuable features of civilization. MacKaye and those who supported his vision hoped to build a comprehensive system of camps based on communal values along the length of the trail. They sought to broaden Thoreau’s notion of a balanced individual life into a full-fledged balanced society. For MacKaye and his followers the creation of possibilities for leisure served a role in their plan, yet it was one of their less pressing concerns. They ultimately wanted the trail to work as a vehicle for curbing the capitalistic ethos that had arisen with modernity. They dreamed the AT might replace that acquisitive ethos with a much more cooperative ethic. Hiking for its own sake, “as a means to personal fulfillment, was not the goal [MacKaye] espoused,” as his leading biographer, Larry Anderson explains.⁴ As MacKaye intimated in his initial proposal, his goal was to build healthy communities and not merely healthy individuals.⁵

Sixteen years after MacKaye proposed the AT it successfully stretched uninterrupted from Georgia to Maine but the trail did not have the political or social impact he had envisioned. Nor was it intended to by the people who actually built it. Enticed by the grand geographical scale of MacKaye’s idea but not convinced by his political and social concepts, affluent hiking enthusiasts took on the job of actually blazing the trail through the Appalachian peaks, ridges, and valleys. They built a walkway through the woods for personal recreation, not social reformation. The people who built the trail envisioned it as a way for citizens to take a refreshing but temporary

reprieve from their new and seemingly improved modern lives. They acknowledged the personal benefits of the trail but, unlike MacKaye, they were satisfied by the traditional social and economic conventions of their era.⁶

Thus, in practice, the 2,000 mile walkway became a means to take a break from everyday life, as opposed to a means to construct a new communitarian way of life. This tension between MacKaye's conception and what the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) (formed in 1925) actually built provides important clues about where ideas of civilization and wilderness had been as well as where they were going. By comparing what the AT was initially meant to be and what it became, the struggles that brought the trail to fruition appear with greater complexity. A trail envisioned to restructure society toward communitarian ends became a place where well-to-do citizens ventured to take a hiatus from a modernized society's deleterious effects. Nevertheless, affluent trekkers returned to modern civilization without the life-changing political and social experiences that MacKaye hoped the trail would produce.

Long distance hiking has historically tended to rejoice in the rejection of modern material values. Looked upon from a different lens, however, it possesses the opposite dynamics as well. Long distance hiking, with its technological requirements and the necessity of substantial leisure time seems a solid fit for bourgeois capitalism. Indeed, the AT emerged out of these paradoxical meanings inherent in long distance hiking. For some the AT works as a tool for questioning capitalism, or even for rejecting it. At the same time the AT also represented the pervasive individualistic mind-set and a devotion to capitalism that permeated American culture during the twentieth century.

The Life of Benton MacKaye

Having spent much of his youth growing up in sylvan Shirley, Massachusetts, studied geology as an undergraduate and earned a Master's degree in forestry from Harvard, Benton MacKaye was quite familiar with the Northeastern woodlands. He spent many summers between 1897 and 1905 trekking through the forests, mountains, and rural byways of New England. MacKaye had learned the skills and rigors of backpacking from vocal AMC trail blazer Sturgis Pray. Pray's own notion of "a path through the pathless wood" made "with the foot" and the hand "as mere assistant" had tremendous impact on MacKaye's own thinking.⁷

After earning his Harvard degrees, MacKaye focused his professional career on exploring the social problems inherent in regional planning and resource allocation. Like many others in his generation, his ideas were in part responses to the anxieties produced by modernization. He was certainly aware of the Long Trail that James Taylor and company had been building since 1910, through Vermont from Massachusetts to Canada. He had also known of the White Mountains trail projects of the AMC. He was not, however, involved in the discourses that brought these trails into existence. MacKaye ran in different circles. Nevertheless, when he proposed the AT in 1921, it was obvious the Northeast and its hiking clubs provided fertile ground in which his idea could germinate.⁸

The problem MacKaye faced was whether or not the idea would grow into the shape he envisioned. As a forester MacKaye came of age in an era in which the conservationist titan Gifford Pinchot's gospel of efficiency dominated the landscape.⁹ MacKaye, as would be his habit for years to come, did not easily fall into party lines.

Although he admired Pinchot's views, personal experiences molded MacKaye's own perspective on land management. Over time, he became committed to protecting wild lands not just for the most efficient use for the most people for the longest period as Pinchot preached, but for a broader goal of overall well-being for the public good. MacKaye's thinking developed to challenge the predominant production-oriented, utilitarian agenda of Pinchot's conservationist followers. MacKaye's emerging allegiance to preservation ideals and holistic notions of the common good would ultimately manifest themselves in his conception of the AT.¹⁰

Dispatched by the U.S. Forest Service to the areas around the Great Lakes, MacKaye witnessed firsthand the devastation lumber barons left behind. On forestry duties in the Pacific Northwest he encountered the bloody ramifications the "Everett Massacre," where demonstrators from the International Workers of the World violently clashed with a deputized citizenry. On numerous occasions the plight of industrial workers struggling to support themselves and their families reaffirmed MacKaye's feelings that the American social system was fundamentally flawed. MacKaye witnessed these struggles not only in American forests but in the nation's "urban jungles" as well. At different times, he lived in Washington D.C. and in New York City. He was of course also familiar with the urbanized New England landscape where he grew up, went to college, and served many of his forestry duties. As his perceptions of the American social structure evolved it clearly began to run counter to the routes that most others around him had taken. As opposed to the primacy of profit (even long term profit) to which Pinchot's doctrines of efficient use were tethered, MacKaye's vision for forestry and land

management centered on the development of small, socially-efficient, self-sustaining communities.¹¹

The focus on social efficiency as opposed to production efficiency made MacKaye an activist with revolutionary tendencies. Indeed, he proudly saw himself as a radical and aligned with other radicals. He openly attributed what he deemed to be the negative effects of unbridled individualism to capitalism and he believed the best way to remedy the problem would be to construct a new kind of social structure and ethos. MacKaye imagined that wise resource management, predicated on communal well-being, could create a new kind of society. In 1916 he had worked on a “National Colonization Bill,” a scheme to develop communities supported by farming, mining, and lumbering on public lands. As MacKaye’s biographer Larry Anderson notes, the bill was “ambitious, utopian, radical, and ... politically unachievable.”¹² Disenchanted with American politics, in 1918 MacKaye, along with likeminded friends, pledged his services to the new Bolshevik government that had emerged out of the Russian Revolution. Though the Russians turned down the offer, he and his comrades persisted and continued to work toward “a new social order the keynote of whose productive systems shall be service – not profits.” They aimed to “destroy the present industrial feudalism” that controlled regional resources and economies.¹³ As MacKaye declared, “[t]he existing capitalistic competitive organization of society outlived its usefulness – if ever it had any usefulness.”¹⁴ Questioning the nation’s rising consumerism and commercialism, its devotion to the technologies of modernity and the economics of capitalism, while holding a strong affection for experiences with nature, MacKaye had become a Thoreauian engulfed in an industrial age.

MacKaye's Vision of Communal Planning

Knowledgeable about issues of land and resource management, with experience in the mountainous terrain of New England and other areas, MacKaye brought a unique perspective to the activist circles in which he operated. When he spoke of his vision for the AT, his regional planning friends urged him to put his ideas onto paper. In his AT proposal he had conceived a strategy that his activist counterparts could grasp. With the support of fellow self-proclaimed regional planners, Clarence Stein and Harris Whitaker, and later, Lewis Mumford, MacKaye published in 1921 “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning,” in *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects*—a publication edited by Whitaker. Tellingly, as Anderson points out, the article was not published in a journal of forestry or recreation. The article was published and initially supported by a group of intellectuals aiming to change the way their society structured itself. MacKaye and his colleagues represented “the most visionary and radical wing of the era’s evolving American planning movement,” and his scheme for the AT fit neatly into their agenda. Indeed, the published version of MacKaye’s AT proposal was a revised version, with the revolutionary politics toned down with Whitaker’s help, so as to reach a boarder audience. MacKaye and his colleagues wanted to be able to attract those with liberal as well as radical sentiments. The eventual proposal was, as MacKaye admitted, “a flank attack on the problems of social readjustment.”¹⁵ MacKaye’s whole vision for the AT, even if subtle by appearance (which it really was not) was a part of a larger plan motivated by his ideas for sweeping social and economic reforms.

Along with a trail running from Mount Washington in New Hampshire to Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, MacKaye’s initial plan had three other facets that in concert

would “solve the problem of living,” a problem that MacKaye claimed “at bottom [was] an economic one.” The three other facets were shelters, camps, and, eventually full-blown communities placed at regular intervals along the trail. On the AT itself MacKaye proposed non-for-profit shelters be built within walking distance from nearby communities. He envisioned “self owning . . . community camps” built “for recreation, recuperation, and study.” MacKaye specified the camps not become too populous nor should they be “mere ‘playgrounds.’” MacKaye asserted they “should stimulate every possible line of outdoor non-industrial endeavor.” Furthermore, with what today seems an audacious faith, MacKaye assumed that contact with a “primeval environment” would broaden people’s perceptions. Enlightened by the experience of life near the trail, MacKaye projected the camps would naturally evolve into “food and farm camps.” Once developed these camps would simultaneously be “a source of new and needed employment” and allow people get “back to the land.” The trail was to be the backbone, the access to the benefits of nature and the means to connect otherwise autonomous communities.¹⁶

It was a communitarian vision, predicated on Thoreau’s insights about combining the best of both the civilized and uncivilized realms. “The camp community” would be “a sanctuary and a refuge from the scramble of ever-day (sic) world commercial life,” MacKaye proclaimed. “In essence,” MacKaye professed, it was “a retreat from profit.” In such a hamlet, “[c]ooperation replaces antagonism, trust replaces suspicion, emulation replaces competition,” he idealistically averred. Describing the East Coast as “a chain of smoky bee-hive cities,” where the majority failed to escape “the grinding down process of modern life,” MacKaye asserted that modern Americans needed “acres not medicine.”

He deemed the Appalachian Mountains as a place big enough and untouched enough to hold “whole communities planned and equipped for the cure.” The Appalachian belt, he asserted, presented “an opportunity... for that counter migration from city to country that has so long been prayed for.”¹⁷

MacKaye’s fellow regional planners were on board from the start. Very soon the hiking clubs of the Northeast would join the campaign as well. But unlike the regional planners, the socialist discourse that MacKaye had penned was not the main attraction to the more pragmatic trekking clubs. What sparked the interest of well-to-do Northeastern backpackers was the map MacKaye drew of his vision (See Figure 1).

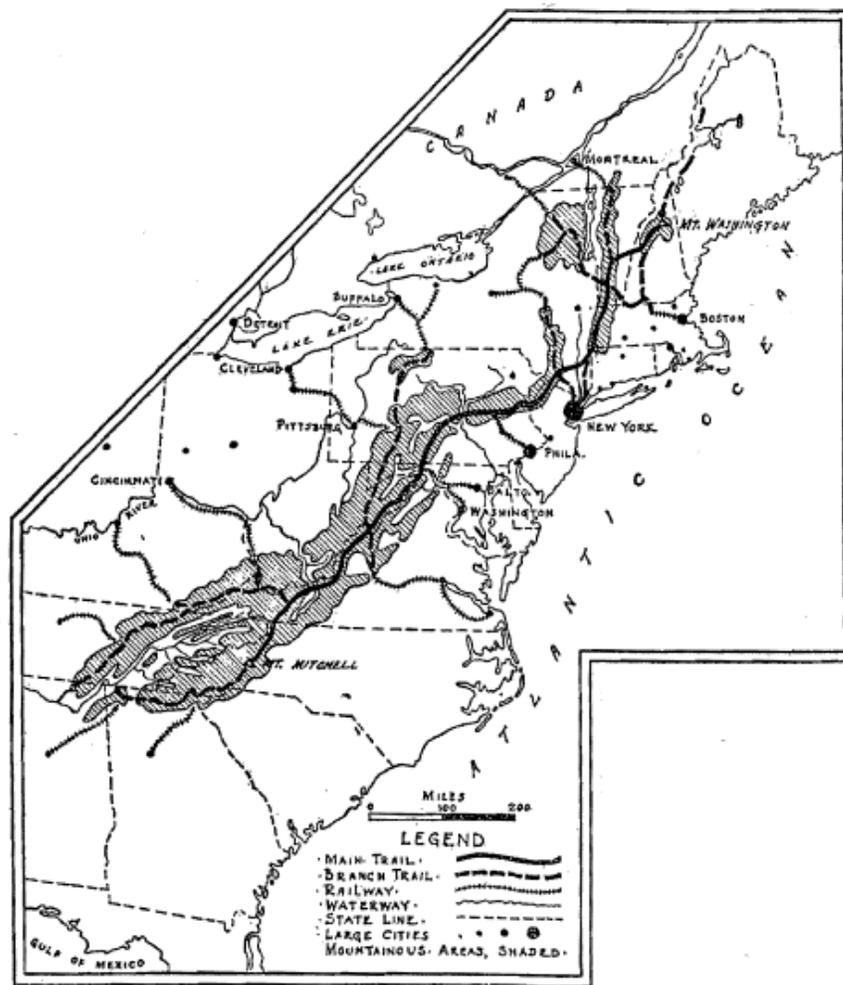


Figure 1: Drawn by MacKaye, this map appeared with his article “The Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning,” in *The Journal of American Institute of Architects* in October of 1921.

Building Support?

MacKaye personally traveled to the Northeast to garner support. He conferred with friends and family, including Sturgis Pray of the AMC. Then, at the invitation of New England Trail Conference (NETC) chairman Allen Chamberlain, MacKaye presented his case to the organization. When it came to blazing long distance trails, if any group was guaranteed to be receptive it would have been the NETC. Indeed, before he left the meeting J. Ashton Allis, a trail builder from New York, offered to blaze the way from the Delaware Water Gap through New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.¹⁸

In April of 1922 MacKaye traveled to New York City for a meeting with potential supporters. Before the meeting ended representatives from various outdoor recreational clubs announced the dissolution of their respective organizations. In place of the smaller clubs, a united New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (NYNJTC) was born, dedicated to the explicit aim of helping to complete the AT. Allis was at the meeting, already recruiting volunteers to help blaze.¹⁹ The Long Trail through Vermont and trails in the White Mountains of New Hampshire were soon allocated to be incorporation into the AT. With support in the North shored up, MacKaye began the more difficult task of finding potential trail blazers in the South. Although hiking was not popular in the Southern states – no hiking clubs yet existed – a number of forest service men stationed below the Mason-Dixon Line expressed a willingness to support the project. Eventually clubs would form, like the NYNJTC, with the intent and purpose of working on the AT.²⁰

With reprints of his proposal in hand, from March through June 1922 MacKaye traveled throughout Northeast. Anderson calls the time “perhaps the most effective and important missionary work MacKaye ever accomplished for the Appalachian Trail.”²¹

Before the end of the year, “in almost every location along Appalachian ranges,” MacKaye observed, “[a] greater or less amount trail making is going on.”²² With the help of NYNJTC leadership, in 1923 the first six miles of trail allocated purely as part of AT became passable through the Palisades Interstate Park in New York.²³ The trail was no pipe dream. Yet, as MacKaye confided to his regional planning counterparts, “how to handle to community feature” of the trail would be a problem.²⁴

In promoting the trail MacKaye made some influential allies. In February 1923 he was given the opportunity to share his idea with the largest audience he had yet drawn. In a *New York Times* essay, MacKaye boldly but vaguely described his project of “imperial design.” With trail blazing already underway, the role of community seemed to weigh on MacKaye’s mind. “If things come to pass as the promoters dare to hope,” he professed, “the building of this trail will be merely the first step in the building of a people’s empire.” But what meant by “a people’s empire” remained unclear.

Throughout the lecture MacKaye pulled for an emotional response, attempting to arouse exceptionalist sentiments toward his subtle socialist ends. The flank attack, once again, was on. “The gist of empire making, for the purpose at hand,” MacKaye claimed, “is the care of the countryside. Herein lies the basis of true patriotism. Why the cry ‘My country!’ and not ‘My city’ or ‘My Government’? Because the others come and go, but our ‘country’ stands eternal.” The best way to care for country figuratively was by caring for it literally. Or was it the other way around? “Patria is country and patria-ism is country-ism,” MacKaye continued, “We hear little of the later, except in times of war. War patriotism has been advertised, but every-day (sic) patriotism has not. Every-day (sic) patriotism, the care of country, is the fundamental principle of empire making for

the people.” MacKaye had the people in mind but refused to state in blunt words what he had in mind for them. He argued for preservation by claiming that “[f]orest culture ... is a big principle in empire-making [that] would restore to the country not only the forest but the folks.”²⁵

MacKaye’s underlying meaning seems evident in the context of his personal history, yet within the context of the article alone it may not have been so obvious. He was open in that he imagined “lay people” involved and that there would be “restoration of thousands of homes.” He noted toward the end that building the trail would “stimulate in the public mind a clear cut vision of constructive national development as against a fog of economic vagaries.” He also made sure to note that the trail was “only the first link ... a start.” And he stated clearly that “access to the camp is as vital as the trail,” that a trail just for hiking “does not wholly function; unless it have (sic) its wayside shelter camp.” Without the camps, he stated, the trail “fails to give full access to the country.” Nevertheless, while adamant on certain points, his rhetoric was ambiguous about the project’s ultimate goal. MacKaye made it known that the AT was more than just a trail, but chose to dimly describe what that really meant. The ultimate “end in view is to open up the realm” and “provide access not only to the country but a whole new social life,” he claimed. Yet he could not bring himself to fully articulate the communitarian social life he had in mind.²⁶

MacKaye must have known that a careful reader might ask what he meant by “realm” and what type of “new social life” he had planned for everyone. It seems odd that MacKaye would have gone through this effort thinking it was in vain. But it seems clear enough that he felt he could not be too explicit about his intentions. He seems to

have felt he knew what needed to be done for others, even if others did not realize it yet. Indeed, he seems to have held strongly to the notion that if he could just build the trail, if he could get the people to Appalachia, they would come to understand what he meant when he said that the “empire of our ambition is the realm of the crest line,” and that the AT would provide “human access to the sources of life.”²⁷ If he could just get the ball rolling, the rest would take care of itself. In the end, MacKaye’s inability to articulate the mission as well as the mission’s pending failure point to the direction American society was heading and the role the AT would play in American culture.

The Vision Falters and Fails

MacKaye’s idea quickly struck a chord with the Northeastern hiking community. Yet, as he feared, Northeastern hikers and trail blazers just as quickly began to reframe MacKaye’s initial vision. One particularly striking instance of this is evident in the role of NYNJTC member Raymond H. Torrey. Torrey was a key player in the NYNJTC. He is credited with the idea to disband the smaller clubs of the area in order to create the larger conference. He also responded to MacKaye’s idea and the NYNJTC’s formation by publishing an enthusiastic article in the *New York Post* the next day. Indeed, many promotional AT articles penned by Torrey in the *Post* would follow in the years to come. Torrey became one of the biggest hiking and AT advocates of the era and, according to biographer Larry Anderson, a faithful ally of MacKaye’s.²⁸

Nonetheless, by the end of the 1920s Torrey’s AT promotions described a blueprint that clearly differed from MacKaye’s. By 1929 the seeds of selective memory were already being sown. Torrey credited his friend for conceiving a “project of grandeur and imagination.” He admitted the proposal was “not merely a walker’s path,

but a kind of spinal cord ... still wild and rugged in portions through the wilderness.” Yet, the spinal cord that Torrey acknowledges MacKaye for imagining was, in Torrey’s view, meant to be “a useful suggestion in the planning of recreation.” MacKaye’s trail, according to Torrey, was intended to provide “outlets for people of the growing metropolitan areas.” Torrey made no mention of a transformation of metropolitan society. As Torrey described it, the AT was to be a place “where people from the cities could find relief from the strains of modern civilization.” It had nothing to do with actually changing the structure of civilized life. Torrey’s depiction portrayed the trail that MacKaye proposed eight years earlier as almost blazed all the way from Maine to North Carolina.²⁹ It was a claim that at best was partly true.

The trail Torrey described being built represented just a part of what MacKaye intended. The rest of MacKaye’s vision had, it seems, already been left behind. Torrey, one of MacKaye’s closest allies (perhaps being even more cautious than his friend in articulating his ultimate hopes for the AT), seems to have helped lay the ground work for the quick conversion of the AT from a project of social rearrangement to a project of more conventional aims.

It is not surprising that the social aspects of MacKaye’s plan were being brushed under the carpet. The people who would lead the construction of the AT, Torrey included, who MacKaye knew were his best chance at actually building the trail, came from a “definite stratum of American society.” That the entire trail would be built by volunteers represented was a point of pride for many AT supporters. Yet in truth, only a certain sector of society could afford the free time necessary to indulge in volunteer trail blazing. The AT’s builders were lawyers, scholars, editors, architects, scientist, and

successful city planners. They did not radically question the current economic or social state of affairs. Even if industrialization had brought about questions they did not anticipate, they lived with too much comfort and confidence to wish for the changes MacKaye had in mind. Well-off, and perhaps well-intentioned, they valued being able to leave the city for the trail. They had little interest in creating communities that might serve as “an alternative to urban industrial society.”³⁰

With the ability of hindsight, by 1925 the future of the AT already had begun to solidify. It was a future with which MacKaye would have little direct involvement. That year a group of supporters met in Washington, D.C. to found the ATC. MacKaye and members of his regional panning following were there. Stein spoke to the group about drawing a distinction between the cities and the mountain crests. He envisioned the entire east coast becoming one long city. “The further ‘Atlantis’ developed the greater the need,” he claimed, ‘to develop ‘Appalachia.’” MacKaye was selected by the group to be the “field organizer,” a short lived position which he in effect had already undertaken. In truth, although MacKaye’s status at the conference was not unnoticed or ineffectual, the meeting likely would never have taken place without the NETC, the NYNJTC, and their followings. MacKaye deserves credit for networking and bringing the groups together. Indeed, in the report of the proceedings, which some speculate that MacKaye wrote, his presence was certainly apparent. The report asserted that the AT would be a “means for making ... land accessible ... for opening up the country.” It would be, the 1925 report claimed, “an escape from civilization.” Yet underneath the surface, even if there was agreement in the wording, the essential nature of the concept of “escape” remained contested terrain. It indeed proved portentous that the fourteen-member

executive committee created at the conference did not include Benton MacKaye.³¹ He would never hold an executive position in the organization that he, more than anyone, was instrumental in creating.

Avery Takes Over

After the conference in 1925, trail blazing moved slowly toward completion. With Torrey at the helm, the NYNJTC blazed its way through New York and New Jersey. In other areas however, especially in the South, although accepted in principle, the project languished. In 1927 Arthur Perkins, a retired lawyer and police court judge from Connecticut, became involved. He revived the project, giving it the managerial jump-start it needed. Perkins rearranged how the ATC was structured. However, perhaps most important of all his contributions was recruiting a twenty-seven-year-old Harvard Law School graduate named Myron Avery to serve as his right-hand man.³²

MacKaye, at this point, still remained aligned with the ATC. In his role as the AT's originator and field manager he held a prominent position with trail blazers. When opportunities arose, he also continued to advocate his broader ambitions for the trail. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent MacKaye's vision was a view the new leadership did not share. At a 1927 NETC meeting with Perkins present, MacKaye made a passionate speech to forward his idea of the AT as an agent of social reform. In the company of the people who had appropriated his project, he did not hold back. He compared the United States to an over-civilized version of Rome bound to fall to barbarism. Coming "straight to the point of [his] philosophy of through trails," it became apparent that the empire MacKaye described building in his 1923 *New York Times* article was one dependent on the fall of another. The purpose of the trail "is to organize a

Barbarian invasion,” MacKaye averred. “It is a counter movement to the Metropolitan invasion,” he proclaimed. “[W]ho are the Barbarians?” he then rhetorically asked. To which he answered, “Why, we are – the members of the New England Trail Conference,” “The Appalachian Trail,” he declared, “should be placed in public hands and become the site for a Barbarian Utopia.”³³ Perkins was allegedly inspired by the speech.³⁴ But if the new ACT constitution he would preside over less than a year later was any indication, he did not really understand it.

In 1928 Perkins organized the second official meeting of the ATC. It was hosted by a new organization formed and headed by Avery, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Conference (PATC). At the meeting Perkins officially became the ATC’s acting chairman. At the same meeting, under Perkins’s freshly implemented leadership, the ATC’s constitution was reworded. The goal of the ATC, the new constitution stated, was to “promote, establish, and maintain a trail for walkers with a system of shelters and other necessary equipment.” The organization aimed to “stimulate public interest in the protection, conservation, and best use of the natural resources within the mountains.”³⁵ No mention of an escape from civilization was made in the new constitution. No wild “realm” was to be opened up. No invasion was planned nor was any “Barbarian Utopia” imagined.

MacKaye had hatched a conception that he could not implement alone. The trail was actually a minor aspect of his much larger utopian plan. Avery proved to be the person who could bring that singular facet of MacKaye’s vision, the trail itself, to life. After Perkins suffered a stroke in 1930, Avery became the heir apparent. He rose to the rank of chairman in 1931 and led the charge to the trail’s completion. He personally

hiked the entire trail in segments as it was being built, rolling a measuring wheel most of the way. Avery was determined that the trail be standardized throughout. He wanted similar signs, mile markers, and consistent blazes over all 2,000 miles of the grand route.³⁶ He focused on practical details and brought about the uniformed framework he desired, along with accurate guides and maps. He oversaw the building of shelters and ensured that water supplies were available on a reliable basis. Above all else, he ensured the trail remained continuous. In his twenty years as chairman he acted purely as a volunteer and, historians agree, in the history of the AT, Avery's influence was on par with MacKaye's contributions.³⁷

With Avery stubborn and persistent in his own practical ideals for an AT devoted to leisure and not to socialism, a falling out with MacKaye became inevitable. MacKaye had some support from the likes of Torrey and others, but not nearly enough to rescue his version of the trail. He could not contend with the dominant sentiments of those who had their feet on the ground with Avery. MacKaye continued to see the AT as a means to racial social and economic changes. Avery and his followers saw the AT as simply “a footpath for hikers in the Appalachian Mountains, extending from Maine to Georgia.”³⁸

When the construction of a skyline drive through the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia threatened to corrupt the primeval environment for which MacKaye aspired, he and Avery philosophically faced-off in a battle for control. Avery was willing to compromise with the federal government's road program meant to create New Deal jobs during the Great Depression. Letting the trail pass near the potential highway or rerouting the trail to a new location at certain points did not bother the leader of the ATC enough for him to openly oppose the highway. MacKaye felt otherwise. He saw the

highway – and all highways passing through national parks for that matter – as a threat to his counterattack on modernization.³⁹ “The Appalachian Trail is a wilderness trail or it is nothing,” MacKaye blustered. His conception of the wild did not include tourist roads for carloads of gawkers.⁴⁰

The conflict over a Skyline Drive that would eventually wind through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia pushed a full-fledged debate out into the open. Arguments erupted at ATC meetings as the back and forth over the issue seemed to divide the conference. In the end MacKaye would be the odd man out. Pleading his case, MacKaye wrote to Avery, “[y]ou are for a *connected* trail – whether or not wilderness; I am for a *wilderness* trail whether or not connected . . . this zest for a *means* (a connected way) has dimmed apparently your vision of the *end* (a wilderness way).” “Wilderness,” MacKaye urged, and “not continuity is the vital point.”⁴¹

Not only did MacKaye and Avery disagree on the importance continuity, they disagreed on the role and meaning of wilderness. Avery replied to MacKaye and went on the offensive. He showed little concern about wilderness as MacKaye, defined it. Avery’s focus was solely on completing the construction of the trail. He reminded MacKaye that the AT project was “all but dead” until he and Perkins took it over. Then, challenging MacKaye’s plea for a wilderness trail with his own practical plan, he lit into the man who had originally conceived of the AT: “It is very pleasant to sit quietly at home and talk of primeval wilderness, and to think it will take care of itself. But to bring such a Trail into being requires hard work, hours of labor under broiling suns and pouring rains, camping in all kinds of weather [and] almost incessant ‘office work’ in other details.”⁴² What MacKaye had envisioned and what Avery was building were two

separate entities. MacKaye wanted to create a specific type of environment for specific social and political purposes. Avery was determined to see the AT completed for sake of providing the nation with more recreation. In the debate over Skyline Drive, it became clear that the two “fathers” of the AT were talking past one another.

As MacKaye admitted in his response to Avery, “further words” were “futile.” MacKaye had his vision and Avery had his trail. Their positions were incompatible and irreconcilable. As the leader of the ATC, the power resided in Avery’s hands. After another short exchange the man who dreamt an AT and the man who built the AT permanently parted ways, with all correspondence between them halted thereafter. MacKaye would be estranged from the ATC until after Avery passed away in 1951.⁴³ Later in life, hailed as a sage who imagined the AT, even MacKaye abandoned his prior vision.⁴⁴ The flank attack had failed.

The Personalized Appalachian Trail

In spite of MacKaye’s original dream, the AT was not to be built to integrate the best of civilization with the best of wilderness into a new communitarian social structure. The community-building facet, at the heart of what MacKaye intended, ultimately held little attraction for the actual blazers. The trail quickly became a recreation project and nothing more. If recreation was good for community, it was good because of what it did for the individuals, good in-and-of-itself, and not because it opened doors to radical political notions.

Like MacKaye, AT builders saw the trail as a means to an alternative mode of life but to them it was to be a momentary alternative and not a permanent reorientation of national politics. The builders converged with designer in that they viewed the trail as a

way to remedy the negative effects of industrialization and urbanization but they diverged in that the adjustments being made were personal ones. Hiking enthusiasts enjoyed the freedom of the outdoors; they took pleasure in being released from conventions; they embraced the label of eccentrics and at times even shared critiques of capitalism. But they were not, at heart, radicals and the passions they bonded over were generally personalized passions.⁴⁵ The common “bond” that “linked” these individuals was not community. It was, as the historian Ronald Foresta has noted, “the common search for satisfaction that came from temporarily departing society.”⁴⁶ They shared an appreciation for an activity each could partake in alone.

MacKaye’s notion of wilderness was novel but not entirely unheard in his time. He would be involved with the ATC into the 1930s, and he had a strong following in regional planning circles. Yet recreation was never his ultimate end. His goal remained creating “a complete and balanced civilization.” He sincerely believed a certain kind of wilderness would help him do that. He continued to proclaim that “woven within a matrix of our territorial development” the “forest and city must grow side by side.”⁴⁷ This, however, was more than most AT trail blazers wanted, let alone fully comprehended.

Historians have differed on assessing the influence of MacKaye’s wilderness philosophy. According to Foresta, the “transformation of the trail from an instrument of social reform to a recreational facility was smooth, uncontested, and forgotten.”⁴⁸ Paul Sutter disagrees to an extent. He credits MacKaye as having presented a new “socially informed brand of conservation” that “pushed conservation politics [and] American politics in general, in a more radical direction.”⁴⁹ Still, Sutter also acknowledges

MacKaye's ideas were reactionary. He was responding to both the social problems of the early twentieth century's industrial economy and already present notions that outdoor recreation could provide a needed escape from those difficulties.⁵⁰ MacKaye's experience and ultimate failures with the AT led him to a role in the formation of the Wilderness Society, a group he founded with the Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshal in 1934.⁵¹ In this respect, MacKaye's philosophy concerning American attitudes about the relationship between wilderness and civilization should not be deemed completely ineffectual.⁵² Nevertheless, when it comes to the AT, MacKaye's intentions for the trail seem to have been forgotten almost the moment after they were first heard. And even if his voice was not entirely forgotten, once Avery had decided he had had enough, MacKaye's loss of influence over the AT was without a doubt smooth and uncontested.

Viewed from this vantage, the AT takes on a contradictory role. What the AT became must, of course, be a part of how Americans historically have understood it. But there is more to the story. In light of MacKaye's original intentions, the significance of the trail in American history ought also to be understood in relation to what it was meant to be but failed to become. While the trail was built by volunteer hiking clubs, it was built for individual hikers who came from distinct social echelons. While the trail became a short-term escape from society it simultaneously became an affirmation of traditional American society. It became a place where those fortunate enough can take a vacation from civilization with no impulses for any sort of real social reform, let alone radical change, as MacKaye once intended. Through all the changes in ideas of wilderness and civilization that led up to the AT, through the trail's complex origins and rather straightforward creation, by becoming *merely* a site for recreation it came to

signify an acceptance of new technologies and their role in a market economy. While it can be seen as a symbol of the positive associations Americans have expressed toward the wild, personal leisure, play, and sport, the trail also provides a more subtle confirmation of capitalism, industry, and the economic and social principles engrained in those modern entities. The AT became a place where a person could leave civilization for a time, always to return to the civilization from which they parted, with civilization and their role in it intact. Envisioned as a tool for social transformation, the AT instead became a vehicle that worked best on an individual basis. Any effect on the dominant social structure of the era had been muted. Individualism and recreation became main components of the wilderness ideal underpinning American conceptions of the AT.

Chapter Three

From Stunt Hikers to 2,000 Milers – Early Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers

On August 14 1937, on Mount Sugarloaf in Maine, the AT became the longest hiking trail in the world.¹ Even before its completion, the prospect of hiking the entire the 2,000+ miles continuously had stirred ambitions. Since the builders of the AT insisted that it was a place for individualized recreation, one might think such a hike fit in nicely with trailblazers' intentions. Nevertheless, the ATC chose to discourage ultra-long-distances treks for fear that they would impinge upon the type of environment it wished to preserve. To the original trailblazers, hiking thousands of miles at a time appeared too driven to align with the reprieve from civilization for which they had intended the Appalachian Trail.

The prospect of a goal-oriented trek, particularly a 2000+ mile thru-hike, raises fundamental questions about the nature of modern hiking. At first glance hiking appears easily classified as a physical activity and leisure pursuit, but not a "sport" in the modern sense of the word. In fact, one of the few things on which Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery agreed was that neither desired for the AT to become a site of tests or contests.² The trail had not been built for pushing individual limits or for competing against others. The AT's blazers foresaw the trail as a place to break from modernity, a place set apart from the hustle and bustle of civilized life. This perspective led Avery and the ATC to regard attempts at speed and distance records as basic misunderstandings of the trail's fundamental purpose. By differentiating hiking from competitive organized sports, the ATC sought to substantiate the AT's presupposed role as a vacation space clearly distinguishable from a competitive and modernized civilization.

The Appalachian Trail's design presented a number of conflicting ideals. The trail was initially envisioned to challenge dominant social trends. Yet by becoming merely a site for recreation it reaffirmed them. What is more, as Avery described it, the AT was to be "devoted solely to the interests of those who would travel and camp in the wilderness." Interestingly, the ATC's chairman defined the lands that the trail traversed as a "wilderness stripped only of its forbidding aspects."³ The designers of the AT imagined it as a wild path relatively untouched by civilized hands but not so primeval that it would swallow modern hikers who might venture upon it.

Maintaining the proper image of wilderness consequently became a vital element for Avery and the ATC to manage. In truth, human designs did not preclude a wilderness label. Individualized, temporary, and non-competitive outings surrounded in all directions by woods seemed a wild enough to produce the kind of "distinctive type of recreation" Avery and the ATC had in mind.⁴ Ideally, hikers and campers stepped onto constructed terrain and experienced a world so different from what they were used to that they sensed they had actually escaped the civilized conventions of their industrious society.

To ensure the proper experiences were had, the ATC's leadership did not, at first, want to endorse speed and endurance endeavors. Over time, however, it became clear that the ethos of modernity and hiking could not be kept altogether separate. Acknowledging the inevitability of modern record-setting quests and welcoming the publicity ultra-long distance hikers generated, the ATC slowly but surely accepted modern sport practices on its cherished primeval terrain.

Thru-Hiking as “Modern Sport”

In his path-breaking work *From Ritual to Record* Allen Guttman theorized that modern sports have seven distinct attributes which set them apart from sports of earlier eras (Primitive, Greek, Roman, and Medieval sports). These attributes – secularism, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucracy, quantification, and the quest for records – arose in American sport and American society around the same time the nation’s new urban elites, concentrated mainly in the Northeast, began traveling to the wilderness to pursue leisure.⁵ Hiking itself did not seem to fit the modern sport mold. But there had always been hikers attempting to break records and achieve endurance feats for as long as there had been trails to hike. As early as the 1880s hikers competed over who could hike the presidential range in New Hampshire the fastest. Herbert Clark, George Marshall, and Bob Marshall (that latter of whom helped found the Wilderness Society with Benton MacKaye) famously set a standard for others to follow when they became the first to climb all forty-six 4,000-foot peaks in the Adirondack Mountains between 1918 and 1925. At Dartmouth College, students enamored of hiking made numerous attempts at twenty-four hour distance records. Repeatedly set and broken on multiple occasions, by 1919 the Dartmouth record stood at 86 miles in a single day. Later, the completion of a fifty-mile stretch of trail through the Whites, supported by an AMC hut system, sparked contests to see who could traverse the mountainous terrain in the shortest time.⁶ Almost as soon as hiking became a popular pastime, there were hikers among them who could not help but bring hiking up to speed with modern sport values, turning the leisurely activities into record-setting contests.

From the 1920s through the 1960s a small group of hikers sought to complete a continuous traverse of the entire AT. Although many of the thru-hikers, as they were labeled, went to the trail for solitude and escape, to the AT's creators what the thru-hikers were doing reeked of the very thing from which the trail was meant to provide a reprieve--modernity. An attempt to hike all 2,000+ miles of the AT continuously (known hereafter as a "thru-hike") certainly appeared to be goal oriented test. Indeed, some thru-hikers openly competed to see who could make the trek in the fewest days, transforming the activity into a contest. By turning hiking into an endurance test, the other six characteristics that Guttmann identified as crucial for the appearance of a modern form of sport soon developed. While they likely could not have articulated Guttmann's characteristics of modern sports, the ATC leadership's impulse to oppose the presence of modern habits on their wilderness trail led them to view record-attempting thru-hikers as miscreants who misunderstood the true value of the Appalachian Trail.

Although thru-hiking may not have inhabited each of Guttmann's seven characteristics to the extent of cultural parallels (such as baseball or football), their presence in long-distance trekking rapidly became evident. Indeed, increasing numbers of thru-hikers made the modern characteristics of the endeavor clear. The potential for equal access in all forms of hiking appears obvious, yet equality in "the conditions of competition" seems an irrelevant concept until an activity such as thru-hiking arrives. Furthermore, most hikers were not paid to traverse the backcountry nor were they prompted to reach the highest levels of hiking performance. Yet a thru hike entailed a level of expertise which could only be gained through hundreds of miles of experience. "For some extended period of time" hiking was not the "main purpose in" most hikers

lives.⁷ Yet, for thru-hikers it appeared to be the exact opposite. By living on the trail months at a time, hiking almost every day, specialization became inevitable. In this light, the impingement of modern values onto a trail meant to be a relief from them begins to come into focus.

Thru-hiking also necessitated rationalization, quantification, a quest for records, and, eventually, bureaucratization. Without a doubt, a rational mind developed quickly among thru-hikers. In a thru-hike an essential “logical relationship between means and end,” one of Guttman’s key features of modern sport forms, existed. To place thru-hiking into Guttman’s paradigm, consider that “the rules of the game [one must travel by foot]” are “perceived . . . as a means to an end [traversing all 2,000+ miles].” Along with hikers keeping track of such quantifiable data as the number of days hiked, the miles hiked, the miles remaining, the miles traversed per day, the hikers’ weight, and the weights of their packs, the fact that ATC itself eventually began to refer to thru-hikers as “2,000 milers” is indeed telling.

The embrace of quantification in modern sports, Guttman argues, is “characterized by the almost inevitable tendency to transform *every* athletic feat into one that can be quantified and measured.” How better to acknowledge the presence of modern sport than to label hikers who traverse the entire AT by the distance they traveled?

Guttman’s culminating characteristic, the quest for records, seems on initial inspection not as prominent in thru-hiking. While some early thru-hikers did make attempts at records, many did not. Nevertheless, one could argue that aiming to complete the 2,000+ mile hike had an equivalent effect to the quest for a record. Attempting to

traverse the AT from end to end was at the core a tremendously difficult test. As Guttman describes it, records are “a stimulus to unimagined heights of achievement and a psychic barrier which thwarts our efforts.” Records, Guttman continues, are “an occasion for frenzy, a form of rationalized madness, [and] a symbol of our civilization.”⁸ The incessant planning, striving, and persistence that a thru-hike required fits Guttman’s modern template. Indeed, the fact that for several decades thru-hikers attempted to conquer the entire Appalachian Trail without success confirms the creation of the “psychic barrier” Guttman identifies as necessary for a record-breaking culture to emerge.

The ATC originally ridiculed hikers who attempted to traverse the entire length of their wilderness walkway, seeking to promote the idea that the trail itself was primeval and unconquerable, not modern and controllable. Eventually, however, the ATC altered its stance. While bureaucratization initially lagged behind Guttman’s other characteristics, the ACT itself would take the lead in determining how a thru-hike should be defined. The ATC even took on the responsibility of keeping careful accounts of which hikers and how many had completed the “modern” task.⁹ As the ATC began to oversee thru-hiking, the wilderness ideal and modern sport converged. Over time the unknown and uncontrolled would be allowed to become entwined with the rationalized, specialized, quantified, and bureaucratized. But before thru-hiking could emerge in a modern form, some unique trekkers would have to alter the predominate perceptions that the endeavor undercut the basic essence of the AT experience.

Extended Trips

Early on, members of the ATC knew that as the longest trail in the world the AT would attract hikers seeking to experience an ultimate endurance test. Yet, when it came to the prospect of a thru-hike, the organization discouraged the idea. When hikers inquired about what it would take and whether or not a continuous end-to-end hike had already been completed, the ATC acknowledged that “extended trips” had been undertaken and that some of them “forwarded careful and valuable observations” about the trail. Myron Avery himself had made many long-distance reconnaissance ventures. Nonetheless, the ATC clearly stated that a thru-hike “probably affords little pleasure or little of the real reward of the route.” The ATC’s publication, the *Appalachian Trailway News (ATN)*, proclaimed that the “charm of the route,” was “with all its varying geological and botanical surroundings.” To make the most of the experience, the *ATN* encouraged hikers to traverse the “trail in short sections.” The journal discouraged “stunt hikes,” such as seeing how far a hiker could travel in a day or trying to hike the whole trail at once.¹⁰

Yet even before the AT was completed, a Georgian forester and trailblazer named Ray Omzer attempted to continuously hike the proposed route from end to end. Starting at the southern terminus, in 1929 he marked the trail as he went and took careful notes, planning to share his findings with Avery. Nevertheless, after suffering a spinal injury on the journey he ended up on top of an operating table at John Hopkins University Hospital instead of on top of Mount Katahdin.¹¹ In 1936 two brothers, Bradford and Raymond Mitchell, attempted a thru-hike but after about 850 miles, with one of the pair suffering from a knee injury, they also abandoned their effort. Along with the physical exertion

that led to these failed attempts, the *ATN* reminded its readers that “the strain of adhering to a schedule ... the difficulties due to delays caused by bad weather ... [and] other mishaps,” made these “stunts hikes” wasted efforts that distracted from the true purpose of the Appalachian Trail.¹²

The ATC in the 1930s and 1940s did not necessarily oppose all long-distance walks in the woods. Elmer C. Adams’ week-long seventy-one-mile trek through the Smokey Mountains in 1939 represented one kind of venture that the ATC promoted. An experienced camper, graduate of the Boy Scouts, and self-described “egoist” satisfied with his “own company,” Adams fit the prototype the ATC had in mind for seekers of wilderness experiences. His hike, as he described it, was “a pleasant vacation jaunt – strenuous but not over taxing, novel and diverting but not dangerous.” He recounted traveling through the Smokies and experiencing the “decivilizing process” that spending days alone in the woods, trekking up mountain summits, sleeping on the ground, dealing with the elements, surviving off of natural water sources, and carrying all his food on his back was supposed to engender. “Bent on innocent sport,” hiking “where and when [he] wished,” Adams “cast loose the work and worries from home.” He had been “cut off from... swarm and fret” and “the things which ordinarily concerned [him] were left far away and below.” With his “workaday personality ... withdrawn” he experienced “a supremely restful feeling of divorcement from everything that once mattered ... America, Europe, mankind, and all mankind’s hustling and bustling and contentiousness faded away,” Adams recalled.¹³

Equally important, as beneficial as such a vacation might have been, Adams easily returned after a week’s time. Refreshed, he went back to “the old world” of

civilization. For Avery and the ATC, Adams' account of the Smokies, "captured and expressed ... [the] allurements of trail travel."¹⁴ As a short-term non-competitive vacation from civilization, Adams' hike was precisely the type of excursion that Avery and the ATC wanted their patrons to experience.

"Extended walks along the Appalachian Trail" did spark "interest" among the general public, as an *ATN* headline announced in a 1941 story.¹⁵ As a nascent organization maintaining a trail without official public support, the publicity that endurance feats garnered became hard for the ATC to turn down. Nevertheless, at first such admiration did not extend to a potential thru-hike. Throughout the 1940s hundred mile-hikes were celebrated. Even the feats of hikers who covered the entire trail but in sections rather than in one long march were commended for their efforts.¹⁶ Since it often took decades to hike the whole thing in sections, such "extended trips" did not seem to require a competitive spirit nor a rational, record-driven outlook. In spite of expressing esteem for hundred-mile hikers, a two thousand mile hike appeared a different story. As Avery explained, the trail "for all practical purposes should be endless"¹⁷ The aggressive modern attitude necessary to hike the entire trail in one grand trip could not align with the ideals for which Avery and his colleagues thought the AT stood. It would no longer be worthwhile to leave society for the AT if the trail became just another instrument for greedy modern exploits motivated by anxious timetables.

In spite of the ATC's campaign to discourage thru-hikes, for some spirited hikers "the 'endless' character of the Appalachian Trail," created an enticing conquest. Throughout the 1940s, numerous trekkers attempted a thru-hike in spite of the ATC's official discouragement. None of the hikers, however, was able to complete the task.

The failures allowed the ATC to firm up its stance on the subject. In fact, by 1948, with “the number of ... ill-advised and faulty planned attempts increasing rather than decreasing,” the ATC felt moved to issue a “warning” against thru-hiking efforts. Stressing the need for adequate preparation and skill (ironically alluding to the very specialization the ATC wanted to avoid) the *ATN* noted that only those who “specially trained for the excursion, as one does for a college contest, in order to be in perfect physical condition” could ever hope to complete the “stunt” successfully. Noting that the trek would take at least six months, the *ATN* dissuaded attempts by claiming the physical strain of going any faster would result in hike-halting injuries. Even though it might be physically possible to hike straight through in half a year, because of the time needed, the “mental hazards,” the “considerable expense,” and the “physical exertion” the *ATN* concluded that “[i]f the Appalachian Trail is [ever] covered in a continuous journey it will not be by someone who begins at one end and ‘drives’ themselves through to the other.” It would only be doable, the article averred, by a hiker who took two years, did not “become oppressed by weeks of solitude in the mountains ... [had] no financial concerns ... and more than all ... [did] not care whether he makes a record or not.”¹⁸

The *ATN* seemed to imply the only way to complete a continuous thru-hike was if a trekker did not actually try to complete one. The *ATN* insisted that even “experienced hikers” who have the ability to hike the entire AT “do not advocate ‘stunt trips.’ Rather they advocated traveling a section at ample time, leisurely.” The message was obvious. To hike the entire trail in “a continuous trip” on any other basis than leisurely, as the *ATN* bluntly reiterated, was “a ‘stunt.’”¹⁹ Experts thus deemed thru-hiking the AT in a single season as nearly impossible. Even if it were possible, *ATN* correspondents considered

thru-hiking attempts as wrongly informed and not worth the effort. Real hikers, the ATC proclaimed, did not rationalize, specialize, or undertake quests for records.

The First Completed Thru-Hike

By the time the ATC's 1948 warning was published, Earl Shaffer had already left Mount Oglethorpe (the AT's southern terminus) a month earlier. Starting on April 4, he trudged northward for 125 days at a pace of 17 miles a day. On August 5 the twenty-nine-year-old World War Two Veteran from Pennsylvania became the first person to complete a continuous thru-hike of the AT.²⁰ When the ATC's Avery heard the news, he reacted with skepticism. But after being questioned by ATC officials familiar with various areas of the trail and then submitting a day-by-day report to the organization, the ATC accepted Shaffer's path-breaking hike as fact.²¹ In the very issue that followed the ATC's prior warning discouraging such a hike and claiming it likely impossible, the *ATN* was forced to admit the observations it made just four months earlier were mistaken.²²

Several years earlier, before the U.S. entered World War Two, Shaffer and a friend, Walter Winemiller, had planned to hike the AT together. Duty to nation during the war put their plan on hold. Shaffer spent four and a half years without furlough in the Pacific Theater. Winemiller, also sent to the Pacific, was killed on Iwo Jima.²³ When the war ended Shaffer went to the AT to "walk the army out of [his] system."²⁴ The war experience, as Shaffer described it, left him "confused and depressed." Upon returning home he decided taking the hike that he and Winemiller had dreamt about "would be the answer" to his malaise.²⁵

Shaffer's trek was a remarkable accomplishment. Although he inquired about guide books, the ATC did not reply soon enough. He made the 2,000+ mile trek without

any of the ATC's literature. In 1948, moreover, the AT lay in disrepair. Due to the war, routine maintenance had floundered. In fact, the trail would not be fully cleared from the neglect until 1951.²⁶ Throughout Shaffer's hike parts of the AT were "impassable or nearly so." Many times Shaffer became so lost that he resorted to assuming a direction and bushwhacking through the forests. Facing spring and summer storms, words, he claimed, could not "describe adequately some of the hardships undergone during prolonged rainstorms and alternating cold spells."²⁷ His response to the harsh weather was simply however, he "kept going."²⁸ For 125 consecutive days Shaffer hiked every day but one, stopping only to visit immediate family in Pennsylvania. Along the way he ran across others acting on similar ambitions. He passed a pair of hikers going north and met another pair traveling south. Out of the five hikers trying to conquer the length of the AT in 1948, only Shaffer completed the feat. As Shaffer would recall years later, the hike became "an exquisite kind of torture."²⁹ Whatever his reasoning for subjecting himself to the ordeal, Shaffer persisted and his name became the first listed in thru-hiking record books. Indeed, as difficult as the trek might have been, he also acknowledged the trek was not something "that anyone else couldn't do."³⁰ Shaffer's claim that any plodder could conquer the AT was certainly not what the ATC wanted to hear.

Shaffer had forged ahead and completed the "stunt" the ACT had urged hikers not to try. Moreover, he did in two months less time than the experts thought possible. Yet Shaffer's trek was not as easy as he claimed. He certainly, almost to the tee, fit the ATC's criteria of a person who might be able to complete the arduous trek. His experience in World War Two could be credited for preparing him. Indeed, the *ATN* reported it would likely be some time before another person attempted a thru-hike with

“the unusual experience and training that made it possible for Mr. Shaffer to succeed in such a journey.” Disagreeing with Shaffer’s own observation, the ATC claimed that his feat had been an exception to the general rule.³¹

Although Shaffer and the ATC differed on the difficulty of the trek, the first ever recorded AT thru-hiker otherwise happily supported the ATC’s well-publicized view that wilderness experiences and not record-breaking were at the heart of walking the trail. When invited to share his thoughts about his trek he “emphatically” stated that “the trip was not intended to be a ‘stunt.’” He made the journey through Appalachia because of “a genuine love of wilderness travel [and] a desire for solitude.” He also conceded that his four and half years in the Pacific had made him “psychologically ... well prepared for the trek” while his conditioning, along with his refusal to drink and smoke, made him physically suited for the endeavor.³² Although he proved the ATC had perhaps overestimated the difficulties of a thru-hike, Shaffer did not appear to prove the organization charged with promoting and maintaining the trail altogether wrong in regards to the motives for undertaking a journey on the AT.

Some historians have claimed that Shaffer’s hike had “comparable ... effects as the first four minute mile.”³³ Yet, no one successfully thru-hiked the AT for another three years after Shaffer accomplished it. Even then, the numbers of thru-hikers remained relatively small. Some who followed in Shaffer’s footsteps did not even know he had gone before them. In 1951 thru hiker Eugene Espy was en route to Katahdin when he learned he would be the second person rather than the first to hike the entire AT in one grand march.³⁴

1951 Thru-Hikers

Three years after Shaffer, in the same year that Espy made his epic journey, two more hikers completed successful thru-hikes. A fourth hiker came within three hundred miles before he ran out of finances and had to return home.³⁵ The three who traversed the entire trail in 1951 were all ambitious hikers. Indeed, all three expressed desires to become the first person to conquer a particular aspect of the trail, although the other two, unlike Espy, knew that Shaffer had already claimed the first continuous AT trek from south to north. Although they were few in number, their efforts hinted at type of hiking that the ATC wanted to discourage. While ATC officials did recognize their accomplishments and must have begun to realize a thru-hike was something that many people could successfully complete, the organization was not yet prepared to reverse its opposition to the practice.

Eugene Espy, a twenty-four-year-old “self-described ‘rambling wreck from Georgia Tech” became the second conqueror of the AT (See figure 1).³⁶ He had been



Fig 1: Espy on Sept 30, 1951, photo from Eugene Espy's *Trail of My Life*

going on weeklong bike rides and hitch-hiking trips since he was fifteen. An Eagle Scout, he claimed to have had “a burning desire to hike and enjoy the entire Appalachian Trail” since he had been nineteen-years-old. He claimed that his “motivation” for the “thru-hike was purely to have a fun vacation.” Nevertheless, he planned his vacation knowing that he would have to quit his job to take it.³⁷ Espy began his hike in Georgia on May 31, 1951, and finished

123 days later. When he started his hike he thought he would be the first to hike the trail from end-to-end. While he was adamant afterward that he never intended to hike faster than Shaffer, Espy finished his trek in Maine in two days less time. “Getting the most out of my hiking and completing the Trail seemed the most important, not the time I made,” he explained. Still, for a “fun vacation” Espy’s hike seemed far from a leisurely pursuit. Indeed, it was serious business. “Making the hike” he admitted, “meant more than anything” he had “ever done.”³⁸

Like Espy, Chester Dziengielwiski had planned to thru-hike the AT for many years. In fact, he had made an attempt in 1950 when he walked from Maine to the New Jersey-Pennsylvania border before he “called it quits.” Dziengielwiski, unlike Espy, was well aware that Shaffer had preceded him and he felt no need to apologize for his record-setting objective (as Shaffer and Espy both did). “After many years waiting for the opportunity to be the first to hike the AT in one season,” he wrote, “I was disappointed to learn that Earl Shaffer had done so in 1948.” Dziengielwiski reconciled himself to the fact that he was the first to hike the trail from “the North to South,” as he “always planned.” He claimed that he did the hike “to satisfy a wanderlust feeling, to do something outstanding--different from ... [the] usual routine.”³⁹ The AT, a trail meant as a diversion from an ambition-driven society, was becoming a means for devoted hikers to gain fulfillment on their own terms. While it might allow a person like Dziengielwiski to undertake a journey seemingly apart from social convention, the desire to do “something outstanding” on one’s own was a thoroughly modern sentiment.

Like Espy and Dziengielwiski, Martin Papendick also “had planned to be the first to complete the Appalachian Trail.” He made his thru-hike going north to south in the

same time (123 days) that Espy took going in the opposite direction. Papendick, however, took various bushwhacking ventures on side trails. Like Dziengelwiski, he had hoped to be the first to continuously traverse the trail southward, but “the idea of being the first over the Trail in the opposite direction [referring Shaffer’s north to south hike] in a continuous jaunt was dimmed and later cast aside, when the repeated signature of Mr. Dziengelwiski of Naugatuck Conn kept appearing in the many cylindrical registers along the way.” An experienced mountain climber and student of geology, Papendick reasoned if there were no records to be made he did not need to rush or stay on course. He also noted that “extra fortitude, some privation, and lots of fair weather are necessary for a 2,000 mile trip.”⁴⁰ He did not recommend the trek for others.

The second, third, and fourth successful thru-hike reaffirmed the need for specialization, revealed a level of competition was present, and generated a tradition of quantification on AT journeys. Together, the 1951 trio determined that about 110 days would be as fast a person could go, “in theory,” across the entire trail. As Papendick asserted, to move any faster over the Appalachians “would finish any foolhardy person who attempted it.”⁴¹ This type of conversation likely made the ATC cringe. In fact, it would take a pair of much less likely candidates to nudge the ATC toward a more open stance concerning thru-hikers.

George Miller

In the year following 1951’s “mass assault” on the AT, three more people added their names to the list of successful thru-hikers.⁴² Instead of young men on the verge of their adult and professional lives, as with the 1951 trekkers, one of the next group of hikers was a seventy-two-year-old retired college professor named George Miller.



Fig 2: Miller on his thru-hike circa 1952, courtesy of the ATC

Besides having just having finished his career, instead of being about to start it, Miller differed from previous thru-hikers in that he was an active member of both the ATC and Potomac Appalachian Trail Conference (PACT).⁴³ In March of 1952 he had written to the ATC announcing his attempt with little reservation, “Tomorrow early I shall start to Atlanta and go from there to Mt. Oglethorpe, where I shall begin walking the Trail – S - N.,” Miller proclaimed. “How far I’ll get is unknown,” he wrote, “but I’ll go all the way if possible.”⁴⁴ Carrying an umbrella in case of rain, hiking with a shock of white hair and a scraggly, thick white beard (See figure 2), Miller became a minor sensation as he traveled.⁴⁵

Miller, like thru-hikers before him, had planned his attempt for some time. To get ready he spent a year learning what foods to carry as well as studying maps and guidebooks. He trained by walking ten miles per day, on occasion going twice as far when he felt strong enough. In his basement he paced back and forth, retracing his steps while carrying a fifty-pound backpack. The pack he carried during his thru-hike would weigh a relatively light twenty-five pounds. On top of all that, the ex-educator memorized German poems which he expected would keep him occupied when the hike became tedious.⁴⁶ Such specialization and rationalization seemed to be the type behavior previously looked down upon by ATC.

The attention Miller brought to the trail, however, outweighed those factors. Miller took 139 days to make his trek, taking only nine days off to rest. Locals and

tourists alike who had seen his face in newspapers offered assistance throughout the hike. Along the way he found townspeople willing to share beds and food. In Damascus, Virginia, for instance, the police chief offered a free meal and bed space in a vacant prison cell.⁴⁷ Miller reportedly dropped from 140 to 118 pounds, suffered a sprained ankle, and later contracted an intestinal infection in Vermont.⁴⁸ His tribulations added to the drama. As the story of the seventy-two-year-old hiker spread, publicity for the AT grew to unprecedented levels.

By the time that ATC officials learned Miller was within striking distance of Katahdin, they expressed their full-fledged support. He had last reported back to the organization when his was in Virginia. When word came through the media that he had reached New England the editor of the *ATN*, Jean Stephenson, forwarded Miller a message on behalf of the entire ATC. “All we want to say was to express our interest in what you are doing and our good wishes,” she wrote, “you are doing a remarkable job, and I will want and account of it for the *Appalachian Trailway News*.”⁴⁹ In fact, after Miller finally completed his hike he penned two articles about his venture. For a hiking route that the *ATN* jokingly admitted often got referred to as the “Anonymous Trail,” AT supporters now had to acknowledge that there were “two good things for the ATC about thru hikers: detailed reports and publicity.” The detailed mile-by-mile report Miller submitted, the newspaper accounts, the radio and television interviews, and a reference by “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” of Miller’s feat (see figure 3) were all welcomed by the ATC.⁵⁰ Miller’s geriatric conquest of the AT appeared to be changing the ATC’s stance on thru-hiking.



Fig 3: Miller depicted in a “Ripley’s Believe it or Not” ad, circa 1952, courtesy of the ATC

Emma “Grandma” Gatewood

The attention Miller brought to the AT would pale in comparison to the interest media took in Emma “Grandma” Gatewood. At sixty seven years old, a mother of 11 and grandmother of 23, Gatewood became the first woman to complete a solo thru-hike of the AT alone. As the *ATN* had reported earlier, in 1952 Mildred Lamb had thru-hiked the trail with her husband Richard.⁵¹ Gatewood’s story became so sensationalized, however, that when the *ATN* covered her attempt the newsletter easily forgot about Lamb. In September of 1955, with Gatewood already having traveled from Georgia to Vermont, the magazine proclaimed that when she completed her trek “she would be the first woman to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.”⁵² Although she would be a

controversial figure at times, in the end Gatewood's presence did more to alter AT feelings about thru-hikers than anyone else.

Gatewood reportedly learned about the AT by reading about the trail in *National Geographic* in 1952. The article (at the time, correctly) claimed that no women had yet



Fig 4: Emma "Grandma" Gatewood on her thru-hike circa 1955, from *Sport Illustrated* August 15, 1955

thru-hiked the trail. As Gatewood told newspapers during her thru-hike, right then and there after she finished the article she got her "determination up and decided to do it."⁵³ She was not an experienced hiker, however. In fact, in July of 1954 she climbed Katahdin and proceeded to begin hiking south only to lose the trail. She spent her first night lost in the woods. A day later she stumbled into a Maine campground and abandoned her initial foray.⁵⁴

One year later, carrying a 25- to 35-pound bag over her shoulder (see figure 4), as opposed to a traditional backpack, and wearing sneakers, Gatewood took off from Georgia.⁵⁵

For her second go around Gatewood was better prepared. By the time she neared the AT's mid-point she had become a minor celebrity. As a Maryland newspaper reported (correctly), with 66 days and 1,000 miles under her belt, she remained "determined to become the first women ever to hike the 2,050 mile Appalachian Trail alone." She had already "worn out two pairs of shoes, but none of her enthusiasm," the reporter proclaimed.⁵⁶

Ten days later Uniontown Pennsylvania's *Morning Herald* announced Gatewood's entrance into its state.⁵⁷ By mid-August Massachusetts's *North Adams Transcript* bid "the greying grandmother" farewell as she "started on the Long Trail in Vermont."⁵⁸ Vermont's *Bennington Evening Banner* picked up the story the next day.⁵⁹ Although rumors swirled as she neared her goal that she would go out dancing in Maine to celebrate after she finished, Gatewood cleared things up in New Hampshire telling a reporter, "[t]hey'll never get me to do that. I'll fool them and come down another side of the mountain."⁶⁰

Within one hundred miles of Katahdin, Gatewood reportedly slowed to an eight miles per day pace due to a leg injury.⁶¹ Slowly but surely, she continued onward. Just ninety miles from the northern terminus, as she reached the infamous Kennebec River crossing she found two forest wardens waiting in a canoe to help her across.⁶² Before she finished her journey, *Sport Illustrated* began to follow the story, hyperbolically reporting that "Grandma" had faced off with an attacking rattle snake, had to heat stones at night to keep from freezing, ate hackberries for snacks, and "sucked bouillon cubes to combat loss of body salt." The nationally published magazine went on to note that when she reached the trail's end Gatewood had promised to "sing America, the Beautiful, 'from sea to shining sea.'"⁶³ No single thru-hiker before or since garnered as much publicity during their thru-hike as Gatewood did during her 1955 journey.

One hundred and forty six days after starting from Georgia, 30 pounds lighter, and on her seventh pair of shoes, Gatewood became the seventh person, second woman, and first lone female to thru-hike the AT.⁶⁴ However, for the ATC all publicity would not prove to be good publicity. When Gatewood finished her trek, although portraying her as

a backcountry hiker with “pioneer guts,” *Sports Illustrated* did not paint the ATC or the AT in the best of light. Gatewood, the magazine claimed, had been attracted to the “alluring things she had read about.” But the “reality” she found on the trail “was disillusionment.” According to *Sports Illustrated*, in 1955 “the trail” was “actually not so much a single trail as a succession of links.” The national magazine’s description was not without merit. Blaming “local groups” that were “responsible for maintenance” for letting the trail fall “into scandalous neglect,” *Sports Illustrated* depicted the AT as “a succession of obstacle courses not suited to Army basic training.”⁶⁵ In the article Gatewood recalled “terrible blow downs, burnt over areas that were never remarked, gravel and sand washouts, weeds and brush to your neck ... and shelters ... burnt down or filthy.” The trail, she lamented, was “a nightmare.”⁶⁶ Especially after all the positive sentiments written by small town newspapers along the East Coast, the widely read criticism found in *Sports Illustrated* must have been hard for members of the ATC to swallow.

The *Sports Illustrated* article appeared to be an indictment of mismanagement by the ATC. While the ATC wanted to do its best to utilize the positive publicity Gatewood had created, the organization also felt compelled to counter *Sports Illustrated*’s portrayal. To do so, the ATC returned to its traditional stance on thru-hikers. There was a proper way to explore the AT argued club officials, of which Gatewood apparently was unaware. In an underhanded compliment the *ATN* stated that “Mrs. Gatewood deserves much credit for accomplishing her objective in spite of a lack of woods experience or the right kind of equipment, and without proper clothing or food.” Moreover, the *ATN*’s correspondent continued, though “a remarkable feat ... she is fortunate to have come

through as well as she did.” The reporter hoped that “no one will follow her example in lack of preparedness, experience, and equipment.”⁶⁷ Gatewood’s imprudence and her lack of wilderness knowledge appeared to have tainted her trail experience.

Directly addressing *Sports Illustrated*, the *ATN* claimed because of its “complete lack of background knowledge,” the popular weekly did not realize that Gatewood’s “basic difficulty may have been that” she “apparently made her trip, not because she knew and loved the woods and mountains, but because she had started impulsively.” The *ATN*’s reporter insisted that if *Sports Illustrated* had known of Gatewood’s lack of experience and her misguided motive it would have understood why the trail had been so difficult for her. Hiking the AT “with such a motive ... the hard way, she got little from the trip,” the *ATN* asserted. She thus “could impart on the [*Sports Illustrated*] interviewer only the fact of her determination,” the reporter concluded.⁶⁸ In the final analysis, the *ATN* argued that Gatewood had hiked the AT wrongly and so she could not convey the true essence of the trail.

If the septuagenarian George Miller had begun to push the ATC to a more welcoming opinion of thru-hikers, “Grandma” Gatewood pushed the organization back to its earlier animosity toward end-to-end treks. That setback, however, would not last very long. In fact, “Grandma” Gatewood had another hike to make, a trek that would highlight the AT’s charms and cause her comments to *Sports Illustrated* to be easily forgotten.

In 1957, two years after her first transit of the AT, Gatewood took to the trail again and did what no hiker had ever done before when she thru-hiked the AT a second time. Starting in late April and finishing in late September, she once again became a

national celebrity. As before newspapers picked up the story as she traveled.

“Grandma,” one reporter marveled, was “out to conquer the Appalachian Trail again.”⁶⁹

How could the sixty-nine-year-old woman, now with now twenty-five grandchildren, think that the trail’s condition was scandalous or fail to enjoy the experience of it if she hiked the entire thing twice in three years? It also did not hurt that by the second time around Gatewood had chosen to become a registered ATC member.⁷⁰

Less than a month before her seventieth birthday Gatewood had “done it again.”⁷¹ This time the *ATN* had nothing but kind words for the AT’s most famous hiker. Any article that cited her for saying she had “had enough” of the trail two years earlier clearly must have been “a misquotation or a temporary reaction,” the official journal of the AT cheered.⁷² Gatewood had gone from a naive old lady lost on her first day of hiking to the most experienced AT hiker in the United States. It would be inaccurate to argue that what the ATC intended for the trail changed solely because Gatewood’s famous thru-hikes. But after “Grandma” Gatewood the ATC increasingly understood that the trail needed to save some room for lengthier visits. Indeed, after the publicity generated by Miller and Gatewood, the ATC seemed convinced that thru-hikes might be worth accommodating.

Senior Citizens and Counting Days in Thru-Hikes

After Miller and Gatewood, the ATC saw thru-hikers differently. Both Miller and Gatewood’s hikes represented the record-setting ethos that the ATC wanted to avoid in earlier decades. Miller had set the record as the oldest hiker while Gatewood had been first solo woman and the first two-time thru-hiker. Thru-hiking records seemed here to stay after their walks in the woods. Yet, the fact that Miller was a seven-two-year-old

retired professor and Gatewood was a sixty-nine-year-old grandmother seemed to reduce the tension of having modern sport intruding onto the trail. Their age and the publicity they generated for the AT made it hard to view them as having an adverse impact on the trail's environment. How harmful could someone's grandparents going for a long hike really be for the AT's reputation as a place to escape from the modern world? Even if motivated by the quest for records and a desire for fame, both Miller and Gatewood promoted not only themselves but the people who had built the trail and the ATC officials who had overseen it for more than two decades.

From Gatewood's second thru-hike in 1957 through 1970, twenty more people reported thru-hiking the AT. Some would take as long as eight months with no pace or end date in mind. Others counted every mile and every day. Each thru-hiker had their own opinion about how the AT should be hiked. Yet because of the necessity of rationalization and specialization to complete the task, all the thru-hikers embodied to some extent the attitudes embedded in modern forms of sport. Some of the thru-hikers, of course, took more modern approaches than others.

In 1960 two theological seminary graduates hiked 11 hours a day, covering over 20 miles a day, and proved the AT could be hiked could in fewer than 100 days.⁷³ Three years later another all-male duo just out of college set out explicitly to break the 99-day mark. They succeeded in lowering the record from 99 to 94 days.⁷⁴ In 1969, a seventeen-year-old named Eric Ryback, who later became the first person to thru-hike both the 2,600 mile Pacific Crest Trail and the 3,100 mile Continental Divided trail (before either route had technically been completed), shattered the 94-day record by traversing the AT in 81 days. Just one year after Ryback's sprint across the AT, Branelly Owen quit his job

and set out from Georgia to break the speed record. As Owen explained, that “the record meant everything” to him.⁷⁵ An Eagle Scout, ex-paratrooper, and Green Beret with training in jungle warfare, he had learned the about trail by reading stories about Gatewood years early. He averaged about 28 miles per day, hiked 14 to 15 hours at a time, and set the new record in an astonishing 73 days.⁷⁶

Through all this the record-chasing the ATC remained somewhat ambivalent about embracing competitive thru-hiking. The organization had altered its thinking on thru-hikes in general, but keeping track of time instead of taking in vistas still seemed too far off course. When the trail was first hiked in 99 days the *ATN* praised “Springer to Katahdin” as “the hike of a life time.” But the journal also felt the need to remind readers that “the Appalachian Trail is not intended for end-to-end hiking, and the glory of the woods is not reserved for the long distance hiker.”⁷⁷ As time went on, the organization accepted thru-hikers but continued to struggle to accept the modern attitudes they imposed on the idealized experience and founding conventions of the Appalachian Trail.

Struggling to Accept the Thru-Hikers

Dorothy Laker’s depiction by the *ATN* reveals the ATC’s internal conflicts over accepting continuous end-to-end thru-hikes. Laker finished her first thru-hike in 1957, just ten days after Gatewood finished her well-publicized second trek. By then, the ATC had moved beyond demeaning thru-hikers such as Laker for attempting a “stunt.” Yet to reconcile the inherent differences between record-setting quests and walks in the woods to escape modernity, the ATC preferred to portray thru-hikers as aligned with the organization’s guiding philosophy.

Laker, credited with being the second woman to thru-hike the AT even though she was the third, was portrayed as sharing with ATC officials a common understanding over the conditions of the trail and how it should be traversed. According to the *ATN*, Laker had taken a break from her job to vacation for “some months alone in the woods.” She was not racing for records or aiming for any firsts. In fact, she did not even tell anyone what she had planned. As the *ATN* recalled, the ATC only learned of Laker’s hike because others communicating along the trail realized they had met the same person at locations hundreds of miles apart.⁷⁸ Quite explicit about her hiking strategy, Laker chose to “[t]ake lots and lots of time.” She made it clear that she was not setting records. “What a folly to race through paradise” she stated.⁷⁹ Clearly, from *ATN* reporters, Laker appeared precisely the type of thru-hiker that fit profile and attitudes the ATC envisioned.

If only Laker’s hike had been as the ATC described it. In reality, Laker found the trail, at times, in far from good condition. For each section of “paradise,” she found areas overgrown with brush. She complained that blazes were faded and spaced hundreds of feet apart, making it difficult to follow the trail. Sometime there were no blazes at all to mark the route. As Laker put it, “I couldn’t understand how hikers had found their way along the trail. It became more like a trial.” She would later describe Mount Oglethorpe not as a place of pristine wilderness but as “mostly duck farms.” In Maine, as Laker explained, the terrain had been “very strenuous . . . time-consuming, dangerous, and hard on gear and the seat of the pants.” She recommended it “only for the masochistic and those doing penance.” What is more, Laker had not actually chosen to just take a break from her modern life. Before she decided to begin her thru-hike she had lost her job. She traversed the trail while unemployed.⁸⁰ Her notion of paradise did not so nicely align

with the ATC's public description. Still, despite all the duck farms and strenuous terrain, she did enjoy her time on the AT. She would return to thru-hike it again seven years later. It was just that what she enjoyed and how she enjoyed it was not what the ATC envisioned as the ideal thru-hiking experience.

After Miller and Gatewood, the ATC struggled to fit thru-hikers such as Laker into its schemes. Meanwhile, Laker, and others even more focused on pushing their capacities, hiked as they pleased. The tensions between what the ATC wanted the trail to be and what thru-hikers sought remained, even as the organization had begun to accept some forms of end-to-end travels.

Can Modern Sport and Wilderness Coexist?

By 1970 the ATC had dramatically changed its tune from the stance it took four decades earlier when the AT first opened. As will be described in chapter five, full-fledged acceptance of thru-hikers in all their forms was on the horizon. Indeed, when Branley Owen completed his 73-day trek in record time the acting chairman of the ATC, Stanley Murray, had been made well aware of the quest by local media outlets. Murray seemed to realize his best option was to embrace thru-hikers on their own terms. The reality was that other "misuses" of the trail--from rowdy parties to large fires to increasing congestion and widespread litter--had become more pressing issues for the ATC than haggling over the nature and purpose of thru-hikes. As time passed it seemed clear that, to the extent the organization once feared, a few eccentric and anomalous thru-hikers did not disrupt what the ATC defined as the basic meaning of the trail for the general public--short term personal reprieve from modern society.

In many ways, Miller, Gatewood, and the other “celebrity” thru-hikers had altered the ATC’s vision. Thus, Murray gladly reached out to Owen when he finished his walk, and voiced official ATC approval. “Congratulations on your completion of the Trail in record time” the acting chairman wrote to the ex-paratrooper. Murray then asked Owen if he would be willing to come to an ATC meeting where he would publicly receive an award for his accomplishment.⁸¹

When David Odell announced that same year he would attempt to break Owen’s 73-day mark, the ATC would make sure it did its due process. “A more enjoyable trip may result from taking 3 to 4 months, say from April to September,” trail officials told Odell.⁸² Nevertheless, the publicity from such record-setting hikes had proven beneficial, he would not disrupt anyone else’s shorter jaunt with his endeavor, and the ATC had come to realize that its rhetoric could not discourage hikers from the traversing the entire trail as they wished anyhow. By 1970 some within the organization expressed an awareness of the flood of thru-hikers the new decade would bring. In a remarkable change from its original stance on thru-hikes, the ATC conceded and thus told Odell that he was pursuing “a worthy goal,” and that “such a trip would be a rewarding and memorable experience.”⁸³ Quests for records and wilderness recreation, the ATC had concluded, could coexist

Chapter Four

From the “Me Generation” to the Backpacking Boom – America in the 1970s

For European settlers in North America wilderness had originally represented the unknown and uncontrolled world. It was not a place people wanted to be, let alone visit for recreational purposes. Wilderness had been a place where early settlers and pioneers had to be, and had to control, to survive. Society worked to tame it and put it to good use. As civilization conquered wilderness, however, the way Americans conceived of the wild changed. By the turn of the twentieth century the meanings attributed to the term “wilderness” would have been unrecognizable to the nation’s founders. Indeed, the AT would have been inconceivable, let alone the prospect of hundreds of thru-hikers spending months at a time traversing it. No longer deemed dangerous, wilderness became a distinct and pristine part of the world separate from the deleterious influences of modern civilization. As Benton MacKaye’s loss of influence over the AT exemplified wilderness recreation did not challenge America’s capitalistic consumer culture. It simply presented a place to take a temporary break from it. Americans began to go back to nature through leisure and recreation. As the previous chapter elucidated, although trailblazers had been apprehensive at first, 2,000-mile hikes that could take half a year to complete, or could be contested for a record times, became a means for taking such a wilderness hiatus from civilization.

In the 1970s the number of people who took vacations from civilization on the AT increased dramatically. A “backpacking boom” took off in American culture, increasing

the number of hikers on the AT and at other wilderness destinations. By the end of the decade an estimated four million people a year visited the trail.¹

In the 1970s newly developed infrastructure, the spread of information, and technological innovations made backpacking more accessible than ever before. But perhaps most important, a desire to gain individual fulfillment on one's own terms had come into vogue. As one scholar critically put it, the seventies were "an apolitical, devitalized decade of intense, morally debilitating, preoccupation with the self."² Putting moral judgment aside for the moment, wilderness recreation fit the mold for the new emphasis on the pursuit of personal meaning. Instead of an experience predicated on social power over the natural world, the important facet of wilderness had become the experience of a personal separation from society. Even as government organizations and private clubs allocated its spaces and built its entryways, wilderness became an ideal place to get in touch with one's self. As a place apart from society, wilderness appeared a ripe arena for authentic individualized experiences unmediated by social conventions.³

The desire for personal fulfillment had been a repercussion of a rising distrust of government and institutions that emerged out the tumultuous 1960s. Americans no longer seemed able to find meaning in communitarian ends. Expectations for the thriving nation that arose after World War Two seemed to have fallen short. The counterculture of the sixties had challenged government policies but had flittered out, never offering a practical new direction to take. To an unprecedented extent, general doubts concerning the path of American civilization had fermented. Unsatisfied where things were going, yet unable to organize a different path, transformation of the self became the popular route for channeling social energies. If people or small groups could not change society,

then individuals would change themselves.⁴ As the narrator of the 1973 cult classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* proclaimed, “[t]he place to improve the world [was] one's own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there.”⁵

Throughout the 1970s Americans went about this objective in various ways. Many made use of wilderness ideals. Novice hikers took weekend or week long backpacking trips. Some more experienced hikers as well as a few ambitious novices spent months at a time traversing the entire AT. Historically defined by its opposition to civilization, wilderness areas became a space where the self could be predominant. Going back-to-nature, and away from civilization, became a means to find autonomy, self-sufficiency, and fulfillment. The AT became a prime “me generation” destination.

Distrust and Disappointment

Social critic David Furman has argued that more than the shortcomings of the 1970s, the movement toward personalized meanings came about because of a perceived failure to meet lofty prospects stemming from post-World War Two prosperity.⁶ Historian Bruce J. Schulman likewise revealed the loss of faith in social hierarchy resulted from the failure to meet expectations. Following the affluence of the fifties, the sixties saw two Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated. Race riots, police brutality, and student protests in response to Vietnam challenged authority. In the seventies the Watergate scandal coincided with revelations that the American citizenry had been lied to about their nation’s entrance into the Vietnam War, as well as other covert military operations. As the war lingered, protests continued, and body counts rose. On the home front the economy began to sputter. Middle Eastern embargos led to multiple oil crises. The seemingly impossible combination of simultaneously rising costs

and increased unemployment left businesses dumbfounded by “stagflation.” A flood of distrust and disappointment gushed forth. Indeed, Schulman argued that an era of “unchallenged hegemony and unprecedented affluence” seemed to have come to an end.⁷

By the start of the 1970s many young Americans felt especially alienated. One opinion poll found most college students had considered moving out of the country, half held no living American in “high regard,” and 40% diagnosed America as a “sick society.”⁸ As Schulman notes, during the 1970s young “Americans retreated from... expansive universalist visions.”⁹ Notions of social solidarity and conceptions of a national community diminished. Replacing community politics was a politics of personal identity. This new orientation led Americans to look “almost exclusively at themselves.”¹⁰ As one contemporary scholar put it, the new “dominate thrust of America civilization [became] a quest for personal fulfillment.”¹¹ As they lost faith in larger social causes, Americans turn their attentions inwards.

“The Me Decade”

A well-known hiker and writer, Colin Fletcher stressed finding meaning through the personal cultivation of solitude. As the “high priest” of the 1970s backpacking boom, Fletcher’s 1968 account of his solo two-month trek through the Grand Canyon gained renown.¹² His follow-up publication, *The Compete Walker*, explained the fundamentals of backpacking and became a must-read for hordes of rookie backpackers. According to Fletcher, to grasp the benefits of trekking through the wilderness individuals had to personally “grasp the significance of this other reality.” Indeed, to begin his how-to text Fletcher confessed he had trouble giving clear and concise answers to others when they asked why they should want venture into the backcountry. Ironically however, Fletcher

eventually provided a self-evident rationale. Only after getting out of town, driving into the countryside, walking to a grassy summit, and spending two evenings alone could he say what he wanted to say. “The simple life is not a substitute,” Fletcher wrote, “only a corrective.” Not aiming “to... knock champagne and sidewalks and Boeing 707’s,” the benefits Fletcher offered, as his own instance exemplified, found their basis in individual experience. Being alone in the wild, he claimed, allowed the “complexities of modern life... viewed in perspective against more certain and lasting reality” to “make more sense.”¹³ Although Fletcher may have been alone in the Grand Canyon as well as atop his grassy summit, in his individualistic search for meaning he had company.

Social commentator Tom Wolfe saw the changes taking place in the 1970s and famously branded the era “the Me Decade.” In every demographic, young and old, Wolfe found “ordinary people in America ... breaking off from society, from family, neighborhood, and community, and creating worlds of their own.” “The goal,” Wolfe wrote, was “changing one’s personality – remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self*.”¹⁴ Whether they were retirees moving to Florida or traveling the nation as “trailer sailors,” youth embracing new age religions (Synanon, Arica, and Scientology) or moving to communes (there were approximately 2,000 communes in the US by 1970), or adults choosing not to wed or welcoming divorce (the divorce rate rose above 50% for the first time), Americans chose to do what was best for themselves. In the South, many embraced evangelicalism and the personal relationship with God it entailed. In cities, people flocked to Eastern religions that called on them to meditate and “be here now.” All over the country Americans searched for personal experiences where individual choices made an authentic self-realization possible.¹⁵

Embedded in this focus on the self was a corollary disenfranchisement from various forms of community. Many Americans envisioned themselves as “smothered by the facades and general falseness of society.” They believe that “there was an *other* order that actually reigns supreme in the world.” All they had to do was dig themselves “out from under the junk heap of civilization” and “discover it.”¹⁶ Wolfe called this outlook “The Third Great Awakening,” contrasting it to the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century and the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, American religious and cultural upheavals that had also been centered on new doctrines of individualism and personal fulfillment.¹⁷ People turned away from rationality and traditional social conventions and toward personal intuition. They aimed to find truth and transcendence on their own. As Schulman put it, “Americans chased new pasts, new futures, and new Gods – and they chased them by and for themselves.”¹⁸

Wolfe was not alone his observations of American culture in the seventies. He noted that historically Americans had lived with a sense that their ancestors and their descendants, and even their neighbors, dwelt with them in the present. The idea of making the most of life “here and now” because you only had “one life to live” appeared a new phenomenon. This notion laid the foundation for social critic Christopher Lasch’s 1979 work, *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch posited that “to live for the moment” had become “the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity.”¹⁹ The loss of historical continuity, he believe, had led people to carry “the logic of individualism to the extreme ... to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.” With a Marxist bent, placing historical content under a Freudian psychoanalytic lens, Lasch theorized that a new cultural trend pervaded everyday life and

led people to focus on individual satisfaction and base all their relationships – at work, in their families, with significant others, at all levels of education, even in sports – on an unhealthy preoccupation with the self. Lasch scorned the ramification of the tendency toward self-absorption. As he put it Americans had come to consider themselves in a war of “all against all.” As a consequence, pathological narcissism became the status quo. Lasch’s text offered a scathing, sometimes hyperbolic, depiction of a “collapsing civilization.”²⁰ In spite of its scornful tone, *The Culture of Narcissism* struck a chord, becoming a top seller and winning the 1980 National Book Award for the category of “current interest.”²¹

As Lasch pointed out, the new individualism permeated physical culture as well intellectual forms of culture. Sports scholar Benjamin Rader has described the result the new focus on the self and the desire for personal transformation had on sports and recreational physical activities in America. Historically, at the beginning of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt had explicitly promoted sport as a way to rejuvenate a nation he felt had become soft. Through “the strenuous life” young citizens would grow strong, determined, and morally sound. Sport would help mold America’s future leaders. From the turn of the twentieth century through World War Two conceptions of sport had been decidedly social. In the 1970s, however, what Rader called “the new strenuousness” reoriented the focus upon “the individual rather than upon the society or community.”²² Just as Wolfe had argued, Rader identified the new key to fulfillment in physical activities as personalized experiences that superseded social constraints and allowed for individual autonomy and improvements. As Lasch described in *The Culture of Narcissism*, dissatisfied with jobs and personal relationships, people

preoccupied with extending youth and finding satisfaction in the present took part in sports and joined fitness clubs to remedy their perceived alienation. As Rader notes, Americans in the 1970s aimed to reduce anxiety through experiences of “self-sufficiency.” “All these behaviors,” Rader observed, “could be accomplished by the self, with little reliance upon society.”²³ Some Americans turned to new religions, new drugs, and other new types of therapy to find the fulfillment and sufficiency on their own. Others took control of their lives by becoming disciples of physical fitness.

Running became an especially popular outlet for followers of the new fitness cult.²⁴ Here statistics speak volumes. In 1970, twenty-six men had entered the New York Marathon. By the mid-1980s, organizers were forced to limit entries to 20,000.²⁵ The New York City Runners club tripled its membership between 1976 and 1978 and paid for circulation of the jogger’s magazine *Runner’s World* increased from 76,000 to 250,000, an astounding jump that took place in just one year between May of 1977 to May of 1978.²⁶ As the marathon historian Pamela Cooper has argued, American culture in the 1970s transformed long distance running from the strange pastime of fringe groups into a mainstream mechanism for self-fulfillment among the upwardly mobile middle classes.²⁷

Running, it seemed, fulfilled the needs of the time. The author of the popular *Complete Book of Running*, Jim Fixx, attested to where running fit within the larger cultural ethos of the seventies. “A predisposing factor” for the fitness boom, he claimed, “is that our society is currently in a distinctly self-centered mood.” Americans are “flooded with such unabashedly narcissistic works as *Looking Out For Number One*, *Designing Your Face*, *Adrian Arpel’s 3-Week Crash Makeover / Shapeover Beauty*

Program, [all top sellers],” Fixx explained. “Having lost faith in much of society,” he continued, “[in] government, business, marriage, the church and so on – we seemed to have turned turn to ourselves, putting what faith we can muster in our own minds and bodies.”²⁸ The connections to Wolfe’s and Lasch’s prognoses are abundantly evident in Fixx’s ideas.

Jogging guru George A. Sheehan is a prime example of how running provided a means for personal enlightenment, or as he put it, “the sudden understanding that comes unmasked, unbidden.”²⁹ Sheehan’s philosophic manifesto for runners, *Running and Being*, embodied the individualized zeitgeist of physical activity in the seventies. Sheehan told his readers society had made them “fit the job ... fit the hours ... [and] fit the demands.” An elusive “they,” he claimed, had “made” individuals “prisoners to artificial time.” But by running alone and thinking in the moment, Sheehan declared, people might be able get in touch with a higher level of consciousness. Like Wolfe’s prototype of the “Me Decade” and Rader’s apostle of the “new strenuousity,” Sheehan gained fulfillment by spurring convention and embracing his own desires, living as if there were no tomorrow, achieving self-sufficiency through physical activity and independent experience. “Only in not caring, and in complete detachment, only by existing in the present,” Sheehan proclaimed, “will I find truth.” “To write truth,” he went on (implying the lofty expectation of his work) “I must become truth.” The truth he sought, moreover, was “truth that must be sought deep inside of” himself. “Nothing creative” Sheehan averred, “has been done by committee.” As he bluntly put it, “when I run I am the hunter and the prey is myself, my own truth” – a culture of narcissism, indeed.³⁰

As the pop culture observer David Frum has noted, jogging in the seventies did not become popular because it offered easy amusement or quick aesthetic benefits. There were surely easier ways to relax and more effective means to cosmetic ends than running. In truth, people took to jogging because it did not offer easy leisure and did little to attract the opposite sex. As “the first sacrament of the new religion of the self,” Frum proclaimed that running offered a means to individual fulfillment whose motivation could not be questioned. As an experience of self-sufficiency, meaning, and often spiritual transformation, jogging provided strictly personal benefits. Running allowed “me” to “find myself” without compromise, Frum concluded.³¹

The Concept of Wilderness in the 1970s

In this quest for internal satisfaction, for many Americans of the 1970s, “wilderness became a necessary ingredient,” as the environmental historian Roderick Nash has contended.³² In the United States, Americans had spent three centuries civilizing the land. As diametric opposites, wilderness and civilization had been obvious adversaries. Yet by the seventies the relationship no longer seemed so cut and dry. Americans had seen two world wars, a severe economic depression, race riots, presidential assassinations, presidential deception, and the grimmer side of science and technology embodied in the atomic bomb. Psychoanalysts even went as far as to claim that in scientific terms human beings have been repressed by civilization and would be happier living in a more primitive mode of existence. With 98% of America (excluding Alaska) tamed, might civilization have gone too far? As globetrotting Charles Lindbergh wondered, could “it be that civilization is detrimental to human progress?”³³ At the very least, it seemed possible that the benevolence of civilization had limits. From this

widespread questioning of progress, wilderness emerged in a new philosophical light. Because it was the “antipode of civilization” it appeared to be a perfect antidote to counter civilization’s negative effects.³⁴

Wilderness could put civilization in its proper perspective. Furthermore, successful wilderness travel meant dependence on the self, rather than society. Thus the wild became an ideal place to find the intuitive transcendence society pacified. As one visitor to Yosemite National Park put it, “There are no real values left in society. We come here because it is beautiful, it is real.” Wilderness provided a chance “to restore” what had been “lost in the noise and confusion of the city.” Relying entirely on themselves, wilderness travelers could “experience the reality of the natural world ... to feel themselves flush against the raw edges of existence with recourse to nothing, but their own hands and minds.”³⁵ For millions wilderness became a means to simultaneously escape from a disaffected culture and to experience authentic personal meaning. As Terry and Renny Russell wrote in poetic prose in *On the Loose*, their attempt to convey the richness of a vagabond life in touch with the natural world, “[c]ity life is scary life, inane, insane, tiny and alone. Learn wilderness and you don’t fear anything.” “It feels good to say, ‘I know the Sierra’ or ‘I know Point Reyes.’ But of course you don’t,” the Russells claimed, “what you know is yourself, and Point Reyes and the Sierra have helped.”³⁶

The notion that wilderness was the best place to see reality “as it is” for one’s self was also buttressed by the burgeoning Environmental Movement and its ecological mindset. By the 1970s ecology had reoriented conservationists from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view of nature. Environmentalists were not as concerned with economic ends

or even aesthetic ones. They aimed to preserve life itself. They recognized that human civilization had placed serious strains on the earth's ecosystems.³⁷ Enchanted by post-World War Two affluence, Americans had dismissed pollution as a necessary byproduct of economic progress. But led by the Environmental Movement, Americans began to recognize the dangerous consequences derived from use of chemical concoctions and synthetic materials, helping the public to see how their daily actions could negatively alter the environment.³⁸ A popular new ecological literature, headlined by Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* especially promoted this type of ecological thinking. Furthermore, made-for television environmental disasters such as Cleveland's Cuyahoga River spontaneously catching on fire and an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, sharpened the cause and effect relationship that the ecologists identified between technological innovation, industry, and the environment.³⁹ Symbolically, starting with the first "Earth Day" in 1970, the seventies became the environmental decade.⁴⁰

The placement of humanity within nature, instead of apart from it, differentiated the Environmental Movement from previous wilderness conservation. Unlike traditional notions of wilderness, nature did not exist in some distance place. Nonetheless, although ecology sought to evaporate any theoretical barriers between humanity and nature, the act of going to seemingly wild places, and away from towns and cities, enabled many environmentalists to better comprehend the emerging biocentric world-view. As Nash contended, wilderness acted as a "pointed reminder of man's biological origins, his kinship with all life, and his continued membership in and dependence on the biotic community."⁴¹

The environmental activist Edward Abby personified this new ecological sensibility. Describing his travels through the Utah desert in *Desert Solitaire*, he observed “rock and sunlight and wind and wilderness – that *out there* is a different world ... a world that surrounds and sustains the little world of men as the sea and the sky surround and sustain a ship.”⁴² Hiking guru Colin Fletcher promoted a similar notion. Wilderness, he told readers, will help people realize that “deep down in your fabric you are a part of the web of life, and that the web of life is a part of the rock and air and water of pre-life.”⁴³ In an era of faith in individualism and aspirations for a presupposed higher consciousness, immersion in the experience of wilderness became a useful vehicle for environmental thinkers.

The Backpacking Boom

In the late sixties and seventies, the new individualism, environmentalism, and ideas of wilderness converged. Americans embraced the wild as a place where they could escape the constraints of society, where they could gain fulfillment, and where they could see the world clearly by their own volition. As a result, going back-to-nature became more popular than ever before. As the *New York Times* reported, a “backpacking boom revolutionized American outdoor life.”⁴⁴

As with the running boom, numbers offer some insights into the extent of the backpacking boom. Camp Trail, the largest backpacking equipment manufacturer in the United States at the time, reported a 500% increase in sales between 1966 and 1971. Likewise, retailers such as Kelty, Colorado Outdoor, and Trailwise saw sales double between 1969 and 1971. By then more than sixty million Americans had reported taking a stab at camping.⁴⁵ As one Recreation Equipment Inc. (REI) general manager noted, his

store experienced an *increase* in sales from 1970 to 1971 greater than its *total* sales in 1967.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, veteran hikers began reporting spots where they used to find solitude in the sixties swarmed by first-time backpackers setting up tents. In the White Mountains, where some of the oldest trails in the nation had been blazed, use of the Appalachian Mountain Club's (AMC) hut system increase by 97% from 1969 to 1976. Membership in the AMC, the Green Mountain Club, and the Adirondack Club all shot up as well.⁴⁷

The evolution regarding the concept of wilderness, the culture of individualism of the era, and the new perspective of ecology provided the intellectual groundwork for the boom. To build its practical apparatus, there had been a number of other functional features. The most obvious is a staple of modern American society--technological innovation. Plastics, nylon, aluminum, and foam rubber produced after World War Two were put to use in backpacking gear. New synthetic rubbers and fiber glass facilitated the proliferation of lightweight equipment. Tents that had once weighed fifty pounds now could weigh less than five. Down jackets and sleeping bags, free standing lightweight (or exoskeleton) tents, miniature portable stoves, foam sleeping pads, and light but durable packs entered the market place in greater varieties and quantities. Nonperishable freeze dried foods also became easily available in food stores throughout the nation. As manufacturers and store outlets increased sales, the growing market for hiking gear that had helped to cause the backpacking boom in the first place became an effect of it. Whereas the magazine *Backpacker* initially reviewed only nineteen available packs in its inaugural year of publication, five years later it featured one hundred and twenty nine

(equivalent figures could be found for tents, sleeping, bags, and boots). Novel designs for compasses, rain gear, and socks also stocked store shelves.⁴⁸

On top of innovative equipment, transportation and the spread of information played a role in the boom. Highways and air travel made wilderness areas hundreds and thousands of miles away reachable. Meanwhile, magazines and guide books allowed backpackers to plan trips from the comfort of their homes.⁴⁹ *Backpacker*, solely devoted to long distance hiking, came out with its first issue in 1973. Before that *Wilderness Camping* had penned information on trails and provided camping tips since 1971. A series of books published by *Time-Life* called “The American Wilderness” provided information to would-be campers as well. And, of course, Fletcher’s *The Complete Walker*, which would come to be known as “the hiker’s bible,” sold over half a million copies.⁵⁰ For affluent baby boomers with increased amounts of free time, backpacking was simply more accessible than ever before.

Although all these practical factors added together help to explain why the backpacking boom became possible. Why baby boomers would spend their money and their free time to “go-back-to-nature” is difficult to grasp without taking heed of social and cultural influences. The cost of new equipment needed for a “first rate outfit” to go backpacking added up to approximately \$350 in 1971 (approximately \$1,800 today). Backpackers could have utilized new technologies, spent their money, and their weekends vacationing at resorts or traveling to distant cities. Instead, many decided to pay money and spend time trekking over the mountains and through the woods. Fletcher complained just three year after publishing *The Complete Walker* that “the woods are

overrun and sons of bitches like me are half the problem”⁵¹ But only half the problem, if that.

Harvey Manning, who penned a 1970 guide book inviting hikers to the Pacific Northwest, acknowledged somewhat regretfully that “we published guidebooks because we felt a thousand boots ... preferable to one bulldozer and that to save wildlands (sic) we must make them famous.”⁵² Yet Manning did not anticipate the extent of boom. Looking back just five years after his guide came out, he could not figure how equipment or guide books made so many all of a sudden want to go-back-to-nature. He noted that wilderness preserves that had offered in-depth guide books before the seventies experienced equivalent spikes in use when compared to areas that had been unknown before guides became available. He also speculated that equipment and transportation could not explain the immensity of the boom. Money and time simply could have spent elsewhere. He placed some blame on park managers who he felt catered to inexperienced hikers. He also theorized that the general increase in population and the popularity of auto-camping before World War Two had inculcated an affection for the outdoors in the parents of baby boomers who consequently passed their feelings down to the children of the sixties and seventies. Ultimately however, Manning could only grasp for answers. He finally conceded that backpacking seemed to be just another of trend of times. “Apparently a lot a fad followers,” he wrote, “(who if born earlier would have thronged drive-ins, munching cheese burgers and listening to Elvis Presley) decided to try backpacking, along with pot, Zen, casual sex and the other good things going around.”⁵³ Certainly, new equipment, efficient transportation, and the spread of information about hiking fueled the boom. But, as Manning concluded, even the positive

new conceptions of wilderness did not seem as fundamental an instigator as the search for personal fulfillment on one's own terms. Americans turned to drugs, casual sex, Zen, and wilderness for similar reasons.

As hordes of novice outdoorsmen flocked to once lonesome campgrounds, it should be no surprise that experienced hikers as well as some ardent inexperienced individualists filled their packs with an extra day's supply of dehydrated food and headed "farther and farther into the wild," as a *New York Times* article on the backpacking boom observed. "What distinguishes [real] backpackers [from campers and novices]" was "their independence" the *New York Times* correspondent explained. Long distance trekkers wanted to "get away from society." To them "urban life [was] unbearable." As one hiker put it, "[I] backpack because I want to get the hell out of here" (presumably the city or society in general). Hikers went to the "woods" to experience "a whole new set of rules and obligations." Aiming at self-reliance, "in contrast to the cities ... where a terrifying interdependence between man and Machine fetters and restricts the wilderness" allowed hikers to be "existentially free to make decisions and mistakes."⁵⁴ Within this context experienced hikers, as well as some not so experienced ones, were moved to thru-hike the AT. What better way to find meaning within one's self than to spend months at a time seemingly removed from social requirements, the hindrances of everyday life, reliant on one's own physiological ability and psychological persistence? All thru-hikers needed was themselves and what they carried in their packs.

Chapter Five

From Me to Myself - The Emergence of Thru-Hiking on the Appalachian Trail in the 1970s

“I did not conquer the Trail; man can never conquer Nature. I utilized the AT to conquer myself.” – Thru-Hiker Warren Doyle, 1977.¹

In 1967 Appalachian Trail (AT) enthusiasts Ann and Myron Sutton published *The Appalachian Trail: Wilderness on the Doorstep* to alert Americans to the beauty and breadth of the AT. With the backpacking boom about to take off, the Suttons aimed to attract others to their beloved walkway. They described the AT as a “unique recreational asset of prime value to day-use hikers.” In the vein of the Appalachian Trail Conference’s (ATC) traditional stance, the Suttons noted the AT’s “greatest use is short-term[,] short distance hikes.”² Yet in giving their promotional overview, they could not help but express admiration for those who hiked the entire trail. Indeed, their portrayal of early thru-hikers such as Eugene Espy and Emma “Grandma” Gatewood alluded to sentiments that would come to dominate the ensuing decade and indeed lead hordes of hikers to attempt to traverse the entire AT.

“The idea of hiking” the Suttons insisted, “indeed the principle on which the Appalachian Trail was founded, is to get away from the cares of civilization.” The Suttons viewed thru-hikers as devotees of this principle who had set out in search of an effective remedy to the problems of modern life. “The Appalachian Trail is one of the last strongholds of peace in a congested and largely urban world,” they explained. On the AT “the hiker in effect flees from protocol” and is thus “emancipated.” Foretelling the role the AT would have for the generation of the “Third Great Awakening,” by hiking in

“a land as close to original wilderness as the laws and works of men allow,” the Suttons hyperbolically asserted, hikers can witness “the throne of the Gods.”³

In the 1970s the emphasis on meaning through personal experiences and ideals that made wilderness a suitable route to such experiences set the stage for a surge in thru-hiking. To lend support to “Me Decade” adventures, in 1971 a popular how-to text for thru-hiking the AT became available. Around the same time the ATC, facing the inevitable, fully embraced ultra-long distance hikes. Soon hundreds flocked to the AT for the 2,000 mile plus traverse. In the twenty years after Earl Shaffer had first thru hiked the trail, only twenty-two people had followed in his footsteps.⁴ In 1973 alone, 166 known hikers completed the trek.⁵ Indeed, during the seventies, an estimated 760 hikers conquered the entire trail.⁶ Midway through the decade it became clear that thru-hiking had emerged.

An Appalachian Hiker (Ed Garvey)

In 1970 eight people reported completing the entire AT, setting the record for most completions in a single year. Five of the eight were thru-hikers and one of those five had been fifty-five-year-old former ATC secretary Edward Garvey.⁷ When Garvey arrived at Mount Springer to begin his continuous thru-hike it was no longer an contradiction for an ATC member to also be a “driven” thru-hiker. Moreover, although hiking 2,000 miles remained an esoteric phenomenon, backpacking itself was quickly becoming all the rage of outdoor recreation. An ATC volunteer since 1953, Garvey worked countless hours on the AT and had crossed paths with numerous thru-hikers throughout the fifties and sixties. Influenced by the likes of Eric Ryback and others, Garvey took off from Springer too achieve his “long held dream” of hiking the entire trail

in one season. At the time he knew of only twenty-five other thru-hikers who had gone before him. Finding the speedy Branley Owen's signature at the southern terminus's register, penned a day before, Garvey thought he might have some company during his hike. Little did he know that Owen would finish over a hundred days before him.

Garvey, as previous thru-hikers, would traverse the trail as a lone anomaly. Partly by his own doing, however, he would be one of the last thru-hikers to be considered such an unusual site.⁸

Like Benton MacKaye's summons to build the trail fifty years earlier, Colin Fletcher's how-to-backpack text, and other hiking guide books, Garvey's account of his experience in *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* put the flame to a stack of dynamite already there, just waiting to be lit. Preceding a day-by-day account of his hike, Garvey utilized the first 160 pages of his text to discuss proper clothing, footwear, and food for the long trek. He gave a detailed description of how he picked equipment and even discussed potential options he chose to go without. He covered the trail's terrain delineating sixteen unique sections. At some length (an entire chapter, in fact) he discussed "trail etiquette." Garvey had been aware that America was on the verge of the backpacking explosion; he did not want hordes of hikers ruining the wilderness experience. After a careful read of Garvey's book, ambitious hikers had a detailed outline for how to proceed.⁹

Garvey's guidebook found an unexpectedly large market. By the 1970s a significant group of readers wanted to know "how-to" make the journey and were eager to attempt a thru-hike. In truth, Garvey himself fit the "Me Decade" model. After being forced into early retirement, Garvey had gone to the trail for reasons similar to those who

would heed his call. “No one, unless he be a total recluse, can live his life exactly as he pleases. Each day of a man’s life is a series of compromises and accommodations, with members of his family, his co-workers, his boss, his neighbors, and others,” Garvey lamented. But on the AT, he had “days in which all the options” were his. In choosing “the time of arising and the time of going to bed, the choice of food to be eaten at each meal, the speed at which to hike, and the side trails chosen to explore,” Garvey found fulfillment on his own terms. Stopping frequently to meet friends for dinner, wine, and good company at adjacent trail heads, Garvey was by no means a loner. He did, however, expressed the dominant sentiments of time. He desired autonomy from social conventions, an experience of self-sufficiency, and meaning made by his own volition.¹⁰

The Full Embrace of the ATC

Around the same time its former secretary thru-hiked the AT, the ATC decided to fully embrace thru-hiking on the trail. In his book Garvey accurately predicted that soon there would be more thru-hikers in single year than in the entire history of the AT.¹¹ The ATC likely also foresaw the surge of thru-hikers on the horizon. Brushing under the carpet the fact that it used to frown upon thru-hikes, in 1970, the same year Garvey set out from Springer, the ATC announced it had “long been the desire of the Appalachian Trail Conference to recognize those stalwart souls who have accomplished the ‘mountain top’ experience of hiking the entire Trail.” Lester Holmes, the ATC executive director, publicized that his non-profit organization would be “happy to make ... belated recognition with a suitable certificate and a plaque.” Once deemed a “stunt” done by those who did not appreciate the purpose of the AT, thru-hiking (as the idea of wilderness had done) did a complete turnabout. Now, according to Holmes, thru-hikers who

“exhibit a singleness of purpose and trustworthiness seldom found” among the day-hiking recreationists on the trail were the “serious hikers” who embraced the true spirit of the AT.¹²

The ATC quarterly magazine the *Appalachian Trailway News (ATN)* had never had a problem reporting on thru-hikers. As the number of thru-hikes increased in early 1970s documenting thru-hiking became a top priority for the journal. In 1970 Eric Ryback and Jeffery Hancock became the first thru-hikers featured on the magazine’s cover.¹³ A year later three separate thru-hikers gave accounts of their adventures in a single issue.¹⁴ In the first issue of 1972, the second half of the magazine (seven pages) was devoted entirely too thru-hiking. In that issue the *ATN* reported that twenty-one people completed the entire AT in 1971. A record twenty of those twenty-one had been thru-hikers. The one hiker who had not thru-hiked the trail completed his trek in two one-thousand-mile sections—two “half” thru-hikes. Furthermore, the ATC told *ATN* readers that, “as it did in 1971, the Conference staff ... stands ready in 1972 to assist prospective Trail hikers in making their plans.”¹⁵ Later that same year the ATC invited early thru-hikers to gather in Plymouth, New Hampshire, for the “belated recognition” Holmes had previously mentioned. Hikers who made their trek before the ATC felt the need to formally acknowledge them arrived at Plymouth to receive official recognition. The likes of Earl Shaffer, Eugene Espy, and Emma “Grandma” Gatewood attended the Plymouth celebration. Along with thirteen of their thru-hiking counterparts, the thru-hiking pioneers were featured together on the *ATN*’s January 1972 cover.¹⁶ As the rapid increase of thru-hikes began, the ATC seemed by no means bothered by it.

For the twenty thru-hikers who conquered the AT in 1971, the ATC chose Everett Skinner, who successfully thru-hiked the AT in 1968 with his wife and dog, to chair “a committee to review the reports of those who claimed to have hiked the whole trail and authorize awards for them.”¹⁷ With an “accreditation committee” in place, Holmes drew up a stock letter that went out to anyone who notified the ATC that they had completed a thru-hike. “I know it was a great experience,” Holmes told successful thru-hikers, “one that you will cherish as long as you live.” After explaining that once they shared their account with Skinner they would be asked to come to a ceremony to receive a plaque and certificate, Holmes concluded his letter enthusiastically. “CONGRATULATIONS!” he wrote, “You have joined a very special and select group.”¹⁸ As the backpacking boom took off thru-hikes generated intense public interest and consequently became a point of pride for the ATC.

Although the ATC showed foresight in deciding to salute the feat, the organization did not calculate with complete accuracy the number of people who would be motivated to attempt it. Indeed, the accreditation committee did not last very long. An unexpectedly large group of 68 people completed a thru-hike in 1972. Then, in 1973 166 people reportedly thru-hiked the AT.¹⁹ In response, in April 1974, just as a new class thru-hikers set out, the accreditation committee disbanded. The ATC announced that after thru-hikers offered a brief description of their experiences, it would award them a certificate. In the same proclamation, however, the ATC also declared that it would no longer maintain a list or publish the names of “2,000 milers.” Moreover, if thru-hikers wanted plaques the ATC would gladly order them and have them engraved, but first the hikers would have to send money to pay for the plaques themselves.²⁰

Interestingly, at the same time the ATC realized it did not have the resources to “certify” hundreds of thru-hikes a year and pay for plaques, the *ATN* put a halt to featuring thru-hiker accounts in its pages. In the January 1972 issue that allocated half of its space to thru-hiking, four articles had been penned by “2,000 milers.”²¹ For the next four years, aside from an article by Shirley Person, who hike the entire AT with her husband, her eleven-year-old son, and her nine-year-old daughter on weekends, no “2,000 milers” (thru-hiker or those who tackled the AT in segments like the Persons) would be featured in the *ATN*.²² The ATC had noticed the wave of thru-hikers coming at a distance, but when it finally crashed onto the ATC’s shore it was far bigger than expected.

Thru-Hikers of the Surge

Before 1970 only sixty-one people had been recognized for traversing the entire AT-- either in sections or all at once.²³ Less than half of these trekkers had been thru-hikers. When Garvey published his detailed account of his 1970 thru-hike the ATC simultaneously decided to welcome thru-hikers at its meetings and to present them with awards so that the organization could bear witness to their accomplishments. Almost immediately the number of thru-hikers on the trail began to increase exponentially. During the decade of the 1970s, 760 people hiked the entire AT, the majority as thru-hikers. After 20 people thru hiking in 1971; then after Garvey’s book was published more than three times as many traversed the whole AT in 1972. Then in 1973 a record 166 hikers reportedly made the whole trek. Today, more than 12,000 have covered the entire trail.²⁴ Yet it would be inaccurate to give causal credit to Garvey’s book or to the ATC’s recognition programs for the huge increase in thru-hikers. There were larger

reasons why Garvey's book became so popular and why the ATC decided to reverse its stance on thru-hikers when it did. As 1970s thru-hikers attested in variety of accounts, the AT offered an arena that could fulfill the desires of the "me generation."

While hundreds of thru-hikers were successful in their endeavor, the statistics for how many started the trek but failed to complete it was not initially kept track of. However, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (a new title for the previously named Appalachian Trail Conference) has collected data from the most recent years. Since 2000 about 25% who attempt a thru-hike see it to its end.²⁵ Brian King, the ATC Director of Public Affairs, speculated in 1993 that the thru-hiker success rate "used to be closer to ten percent."²⁶ The hike was a difficult and arduous trek. At best only about one in four hikers who started the trek would make the entire journey and become a thru-hiker during the seventies. As Carl Windle, who in 1973 successfully conquered the length of the AT, observed in terse but detailed terms, a thru-hike entailed enormous challenges:

Rain, mud, wet feet, blisters, wind-swept ridges, swollen tendons, pack straps digging into my shoulder; out of food, money, water; diarrhea, getting lost, taking wrong trail; discouraging people, dogs, fever, mental fatigue; always hungry, always thirsty, Trail always going over the toughest part, rattlesnakes, copperheads, rocks of Pennsylvania, bad water of New York, New Jersey, bad Trail markings of southwestern Virginia, floods of Vermont, White Mountain day hikers and their remarks; gnats on top of mountains, blackflies halfway down and mosquitoes at the bottom, shelters taken down because of vandalism, raccoons and porcupines trying to get into the pack... The trail was certainly not a picnic.²⁷

In spite of the difficulties that Windle chronicled, a surge of people felt compelled to attempt thru-hiking the AT. The hike seemed worthwhile to "me generation" seekers because it appeared to offer hikers a way to leave a troubled society and achieve an authentically self-sufficient experience. After their trek, many indeed seemed satisfied with their selves and reassured that their disenchantment with civilization had merits.

Bill O'Brien, who took a leave of absence from work without pay, completed his thru-hike the same year as Garvey. He candidly expressed the spiritual inclinations of the "Third Great Awakening" which would lead hikers of the "Me Decade" to spend months at a time on the AT. "The Trail," O'Brien wrote, "means the awareness of never fearing anything in nature at any hour and a feeling of being more aware of Manitou, as I call my God, than ever before."²⁸ O'Brien not only gained a higher level of awareness through his authentic experience but thru-hiking helped him find his very own "new age" religion! In the following years hundreds of hikers followed O'Brien's and Garvey's lead and left the comforts of technology, the responsibility of jobs, and a seeming dependence on industry for a different mode of living. Still, like disciples of new age religions, inhabitants of communes, and enthusiasts of the fitness boom; by seeing themselves in such individualistic terms, by focusing on changes in themselves, looking to get in touch with their inner authentic selves and dwelling on their own needs and desires, thru-hikers displayed the predominant values of the society they thought they had left behind.

Thus, in the early seventies hikers went to the AT to get away from civilization and achieve authentic experiences on their own. As potential 1971 thru-hiker Jack Pettrey wrote to the ATC: "In effect, I hope to just drop out of this rat race of life for a summer before I start work and am sucked in it for good."²⁹ Likewise, "I was an 'escapist,'" successful 1972 thru-hiker James Rutter admitted, "[but] not in the sense of fleeing from work rather than in gaining relief from our largely unreal life." Exemplifying the desire to live purely in the present, observed by both Wolfe and Lasch, on the AT Rutter claimed, "I *was* living a real life – here 'real' being synonymous with

‘direct.’” In fact, to leave the trail, Rutter asserted, was “to come back to our largely second hand manner of experience.” Leaving the AT--not going to it--was, in his estimation, “to embark on a trip away from the real.”³⁰ Fellow “me generation,” thru-hiker James Castle described the role of independence and self-sufficiency in bringing about the self-actualization he experienced on his 1972 trek. “The actualizing of the dream is something you do on your own two feet,” the Michigander wrote, “Detroit does not help you, you are not carried, the immediacy is direct and immersion authentic.”³¹ Other thru-hikers shared Rutter’s goal of individual fulfillment and autonomy. “The journey,” 1973 thru-hiker Mary King rejoiced, “was the most amazing wonderful and self-edifying I have ever had the opportunity to undertake.”³² The “me generation” had discovered it could discover itself on the AT.

“With so many young determined hikers just zipping along,” as one 1973 thru-hiker recalled, “the first few days on the trail seemed like a cross country track meet.”³³ Another backpacker declared that “‘73 really was the year of the thru hiker.”³⁴ One member of 1973’s record breaking class was notable thru-hiker Warren Doyle. A true “individualist,” Doyle typified the mind-set that led to the thru-hiking surge. At the age of twenty-three Doyle decided he wanted to do “something that had no material reward, no trophy, no cheerleaders, nothing like that.”³⁵ He wanted to spurn the things a misled society valued and thus took to the AT to form his own set values free from civilization. He believed “nature ... was created to assist man in fulfilling his wants ... satisfying his needs.” Doyle, like so many of his generation, wanted to get in touch with his true self. “Nature,” he claimed, “was to serve as a vehicle for self education; the AT would be ‘required reading’ under the topic heading ‘Personal Growth.’ I was going to learn,” he

wrote, “just who I thought I was.” Doyle traversed the AT in 66.5 days, traveled 30.6 miles per day, and dropped 32 pounds in the effort. Detailed quantification and records aside, the purpose of his thru-hike had been clear. “I did not conquer the Trail; man can never conquer nature;” he professed, “I utilized the AT to conquer myself.”³⁶ In the end he insisted his experience had been profound. Yet, in spite of the insights he gained, Doyle admitted that he was not interested in repeating the journey: “I don’t have to think about whether I would ever do it [thru-hike] again. I wouldn’t.”³⁷ Still, not only did his hike confirm to him that “society [was] going down under waves of artificiality and strong currents of conformity,” he found vital benefits on the trail that must have appeared absent elsewhere.³⁸ Interestingly, Doyle did not keep his original promise to never again become a “2000-miler.” Since 1973, he has thru-hiked the AT fifteen more times.³⁹

Doyle’s obsession with thru-hiking has provided useful testimonies for exploring the rationales of “me-generation” trekkers and their successors. As a doctoral candidate at the University of Connecticut, Doyle devised a class where he took groups of twenty or so students on (what else?) thru-hikes. As part of the class, before embarking on the venture, Doyle asked his students to explain why they had enrolled (e.g. why they wanted to do a thru-hike). Their responses speak to Doyle’s influence on their perspectives as well as to the general cultural trend to find self-actualization in wilderness experiences. Doyle’s students expressed an appreciation for nature, a desire to take on a meaningful challenge, and wanting to learn to work as a group on the trek—though the latter sentiment seemingly belies the “me generation” ethos. Although, the students were excited about sharing the adventure with others working in groups appeared to be a way

for them to learn more about themselves. Indeed, more than anything the undergraduates expressed high hopes for self-exploration and self-discovery.⁴⁰

“Most important, I’m curious about my own development and growth ... I hope to gain confidence in myself, but also more direction in my life,” one sophomore wrote. “What interests me the most about the hike,” a female biology major observed, “is the opportunity it provides to learn more about myself, others, and nature.” A fellow biology major claimed, “I think that this type of experience would be a great opportunity to learn more about myself, to make some close friends, and to learn more about nature.” A senior in physical therapy opined, “I think that it offers an excellent opportunity for me to grow as a person ... It is a chance for me to get to know about myself.” A natural resource conservation major asserted that the “trail holds the promise of learning and an emotional experience, an experience that should be done on a personal level ... this expedition would allow an excellent opportunity to cultivate my own awareness of myself and nature.” A sophomore in horticulture wanted to go on the hike because it would provide “an opportunity to really get to know myself ... [It] will be a physically and mentally awakening period.” Yet another student declared, “I’m looking for experiences that will help me to discover more about myself and allow me to grow.” Another student hiker observed that “I hope to expand on an aspect of myself that I never had an opportunity to expand before.”⁴¹

Some of the students noted their alienation from civilization as well. As a senior in business administration explained, “I think my reasons [for going on a thru-hike] center around the fact that I don’t like the American way of life. It is too intense, too competitive. Needless to say, the Trail is just the opposite. I think it would be a perfect

graduation gift, a nice four month escape from reality.” As another student put it, combining estrangement from society with self-exploration, “So why this country? Why this hike? Well, lately I’ve been questioning the way of life in this country – wondering how we’d live without all the ‘necessities’ and luxuries of modern living. It will be great to get back to the basics and forget all the trivia and unnecessary aspects of civilization ... It will be a time to get in tune, both physically and mentally... I’m looking forward to time to explore myself, and in a real way.”⁴² The dominant theme in student responses was that using the prolonged, simplified lifestyle and intimacy with nature that the thru-hike created would allow them to get in touch with their authentic-selves. These young adults of the “Me Generation” aimed to gain insight and clarity about who they “really” were by walking the length of the Appalachian Trail.

Such reflective responses as Doyle’s students gave reached beyond the University of Connecticut’s campus. A number of 1970s thru-hikers wrote books about their trips expressing similar feelings. In 1973, Steven Sherman and Julia Older thru-hiked the AT together. Even for this couple, however, the quest for individual meaning drove their ambition to thru-hike. They both felt personally alienated by society and they both felt they needed to focus on their personal desires. “We had gone the nine-to-five route like everyone else,” the dual authors wrote, and “we had each reached the same conclusion individually: Time is only of consequence when you are pursuing your own disciplines and beliefs.” Sherman and Older had not been experienced hikers. They began their hike with a sleeping bag unfit for the cold at higher altitudes and with ponchos that did not work. They took to the trail, as they put it, “to confirm our convictions that an unpolluted and beautiful America still exists.” They persevered after a rough start and gained the

experiences and insights for which they aimed. “We walked through the extremes,” the couple averred, “both in nature and ourselves.” Standing on top of a mountain in Tennessee, they marveled, “[w]e let ourselves be enmeshed with where we were, briefly losing our identity to the vastness – and gaining more of ourselves in return.” They believed they had achieved self-sufficiency and personal enlightenment. Moreover, whenever society encroached, when the trail got too crowded (at one point they passed 109 other hikers in one day!), when shelters were left unclean, or when the trail was forced to pass too close to the civilized world they grumbled about the “the ugly scares of lumbering debris and destruction,” the “carelessness of man,” and “the crazy nerve center” cities. They became so convinced that trail life was superior to real life that by end of their trek they each “harbored dreams of never leaving.”⁴³

Cindy Cross expressed similar sentiments about her 1977 attempt to thru-hike the AT. She had been working toward an advanced art degree, but confessed to “slipping” and being “out of touch.” From her Philadelphia apartment she “looked down eighteen stories to diseased oaks, diseased pigeons, confused humans running in a maze.” Admitting to feeling that she had been wasting her life, Cross’s sense of alienation was palpable. By the time she attempted her trek, the surge in thru-hikers created a trail community of long-distance trekkers. Cross hiked along with “bankers, chefs, graduate students ... men with families ... single women ... escapists, searchers, the carefree, and the intense.” Like other thru-hikers before her, Cross found the self-transformation and personal meaning for which she aimed. Cross claimed her “relationship with the mountains” became “sacred.” As she traversed them she was “born again.” After Cross’s hiking partner abandoned her because she had been unwilling to continue a

twenty-mile per day pace her partner traveled at, Cross suffered intense loneliness and fatigue. She eventually abandoned her hike in West Virginia after she developed a stress fracture in her foot. Nonetheless, the experience of being able “to live how you feel,” to “be 100% real,” had been too much for Cross to give up. She returned the following summer and completed her hike, suffering through harsh weather, stress, fatigue, and loneliness once more. Yet, while on the AT she seemed “to function on a higher plane.” She never felt “more alive or free in any other situation.”⁴⁴ She, too, had found self-sufficiency and independence on the AT.

By the time David Brill took to the AT in 1979, hundreds of thru-hikers passing over the trail throughout the spring, summer, and fall months had become standard. Few thru-hikers in 1979 likely experienced anything like what early hikers had when they traversed the trail in fifties and sixties. Brill had learned about the AT in 1977 when a coworker mentioned that he had thru-hiked it himself. When Brill graduated from college a year later, he experienced like many others in his generation a sense of estrangement. Haunted by masculine expectations, after preparing to face conscription into the Vietnam War effort and then seeing the zeal of the sixties disappear, he felt “like a man who had spent years preparing – mentally, emotionally – for a test only to arrive a day late.” He was aware of the other outlets for personal meaning that some others embraced, but he still “felt flat.” His solution was to find “something new and different” and so decided to “make the Appalachian Trail [his] quest.”⁴⁵

After researching guide books and equipment and attending a lecture by Ed Garvey, he felt ready. Although Brill wanted to do something different, yet in 1979 when he set out to conquer the AT about five hundred others attempted to thru-hike the AT as

well. In fact, Brill had a number of hiking partners, four of whom were with him most of his trip. He spent one night sharing a shelter with nineteen other hikers and when he summited Mount Katahdin to complete his journey thirteen other thru-hikers made the climb with him. For Brill, the “Appalachian trail was not a lonely place.” Nonetheless, Brill did gain the experience of being apart from society. He wrote of being “isolated from the world” and of visiting “outposts of civilization” only to resupply. He also reveled in self-sufficiency. As he wrote in his journal, “I can’t think of a single thing I really need that I can’t find within myself or within my pack.” Moreover, as others before him, the AT trek served as a vehicle for personal transformation. During a stop early on at Hot Springs, Virginia, Brill had an “awakening.” As he professed, “[f]or the first time in my life I knew that God and all His goodness lurked in every rock, in every tree, in every blade of grass, and in me”⁴⁶ Tom Wolfe’s claim that a third great spiritual awakening had descended on America appeared to be no exaggeration. As the 1970s came to an end, wilderness values, ecological perspectives, religious epiphanies, and a desire to find meaning for one’s self had yet to lose their hold on AT thru-hikers.

The Stories Thru-Hikers Told Themselves about Themselves

Thru-hikers went to AT for similar reasons, and their hikes yielded similar results. This should not be surprising. They were influenced by the same dominate cultural trends, prevalent ideologies, and social values. It may be possible that human beings, civilizations, and places idealized as wilderness have fundamental facets which allow each to react to the others in specific ways. Nevertheless, the individualism of the 1970s, the backpacking boom, and thru-hiking had arrived together and arrived too fast and with too much force to be chalked up to metaphysics alone. The experiences that led thru-

hikers to the trail, as well as the experiences they found on it, were not due purely to the essences of humanity and nature or individuals and civilization. In truth, these experiences appear to be products of self-fulfilling prophecies produced by nurture rather than nature. This by no means aims to diminish the validity of the experiences of separation, independence, sufficiency, and personal meaning that thru-hikers of 1970s discovered on their journeys. In fact, the next chapter present an argument for why these experiences ought to be taken seriously. Simply, to understand thru-hiking in the 1970s it is necessary to align these experiences within the contexts that framed them.

The insights from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's ground-breaking study of Balinese cockfighting can shed analytical light on thru-hiking and the "me generation" culture. Geertz examined cockfights, an immensely the popular activity in Bali, as a non-verbal text which spoke to the values of Balinese culture. He viewed the fights as conveyors of "sentimental" information about Balinese ethos and "private sensibilities." As an anthropologist, Geertz "read over their [the Balinese] shoulders" in an effort to observe what values the Balinese were teaching and learning.⁴⁷

Noting the cockfights centered on gambling, Geertz observed that the fights (which were life and death affairs for the cocks) appeared to place more at stake than just money. Indeed, risking money was "less a measure of utility ... than ... a symbol of moral import." Because winning or losing a bet could seemingly alter one's "status" in the community, the fights were really about "esteem, honor, dignity, [and] respect" rather than "material gain." What Geertz found that was so fascinating, however, was that except for very rare instances, "*no one's status is actually altered* by outcome of a cockfight; it is only, and that momentarily, affirmed or insulted" (my italics). The

Balinese underwent the experience of putting their dignity at risk and proving or failing to prove their honor, yet in the long run little changed. The Balinese, Geertz claimed, put their “public self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium” of their cocks without facing any real dangers (the dual meaning of risking one’s “cock” was no joke or coincidence; Balinese cock fights are strictly masculine affairs). The role of money had not been to increase actual risk but to increase meaningfulness, or at least “the imposition of meaning on life.” The Balinese were, as Geertz wrote, “playing with fire only not getting burnt.”⁴⁸

The “risk” thru-hikers took by traveling so far “away” from society and through “wilderness” worked in a similar fashion. Thru-hikers did put themselves in a position where getting lost, running out of food or water, being attacked by an animal, or being a victim of a crime certainly could have dire consequences. Yet such occurrences are rare. Like the Balinese thru-hikers played with fire but were not really at risk for getting seriously burnt. In truth, the AT was not far enough away from “civilization” to imperil their lives with natural hazards or prevent a quick trip to a modern medical facility.⁴⁹

Gambling on one’s own cock, experiencing status at stake, and putting a bird’s life actually at risk enabled the Balinese to enact and convey cultural values. Likewise, thru-hikers enacted a ritual that included the questioning of social norms, a focus on individualism, and an emphasis on authentic self-produced meanings which their culture valued. The thru-hike through the wilderness, like the cock fight placing one’s honor at risk, was not literally a society-changing event. Instead, it provided a “metasocial commentary” on honor and status rather than the prospect of revolutionary changes in the social structure. What did thru-hikers actually risk? How did the experience actually

change their lives in the long run? Thru-hikers felt that they were getting in touch with their true selves through experiences with “raw” nature. Nevertheless, it could be argued what they were really doing, like the Balinese, was enacting a story to affirm or reaffirm who they wanted to be. As Geertz would put it, thru-hiking was an individualist’s reading of an individual experience. It was “a story they tell themselves about themselves.”⁵⁰ In a decade that valued personal meaning and self-transformation more than ever before, thru-hiking, as with the other self-centered pursuits of the seventies, enabled hikers to present themselves in a certain way and produced stories that they told themselves about themselves. They told themselves who they wanted to be and by preserving 2,000+ miles, they became what they sought. Their stories proclaimed that they were not slaves to modern society but seekers who by their own volition made themselves into their own persons. Indeed, a number of thru-hikers turned their stories into successful books that reached a general audience, thus reinforcing the power of AT thru-hiking tales of “coming out” of mainstream society to discover self-sufficiency and self-actualization. Although their chosen endeavor was one few others desired, in many ways thru-hikers fit right in with the rest of nation they trekked more than two thousand miles across

Chapter Six

From Game to Wild Frame – Thru-Hiking, Games, and Wilderness Recreation

This final chapter will take a philosophical turn and discuss how games and the idea of wilderness can go together. Authentic experiences gained by accessing a natural world beyond human control draws thru-hikers to the AT. The desire for this type of experience, as explained in the previous chapter, helps shed light the question of why a surge in thru-hiking took place in the 1970s. To complement the pervious chapters, this inquiry offers an explanation for how such an experience can come about. While a critical inquiry needs to consider a thru-hike as a part and product of civilization, this chapter provides an argument for how an experience of an authentic wilderness may be possible from a phenomenological stand-point. Partaking in one social construction seems to lead to the experience of another. A properly designed game can bring about the experience of being in a wilderness.

In search of meaningful recreation apart from civilization many have gone to national parks and wilderness preserves to follow trails into the backcountry. Activities such as thru-hiking have become a means to autonomy, self-sufficiency, and experiences of exploration into a novel natural world human artifice did not create. Interestingly however, civilization's influences appear present throughout a hike. Hikers utilize innovative equipment, follow strategically arranged markers, tread human-made trails, and abide by conditions imposed by their own designs. A level of human influence appears not only tolerable, but desirable.

Utilizing thru-hiking as a muse, this chapter begins by tersely revisiting wilderness in a historical context. This will delineate wilderness as dynamic concept that can be interrupted in multiple ways. Then, thru-hiking will be categorized as a game, a human-made artificial obstacle produced by what the philosopher John Searle called “constitutive rules.” Constitutive rules along with other insights from sport philosophers Bernard Suits and Scott Kretchmar will show that although hikers often enjoy the experience of being in wilderness hiking is paradoxically reliant on human innovations and control. However, human influences do not necessarily invalidate the experiences of being in a wilderness during a hike. Instead of diminishing the experience of wilderness, in many cases, game playing seems to promote it. Phenomenologist Michael Polanyi’s theory of meaning will help explain how the integration of “tacit knowledge” within a “frame” makes vivid experiences of being in wilderness possible. This chapter thus offers a plausible explanation for how, even with human influences fundamentally involved, hikers can experience themselves as entering into a world free from civilization’s effects.

Wilderness as a Story

American History has shown that wilderness has no static existence. As the conceptual antithesis of civilization, it has evolved over time. Fear and antagonism gave way to romanticism and transcendentalism. These spiritual outlooks opened the door for appreciation and wilderness recreation in the twentieth century.¹ Today the popularized “story” of wilderness is that it is a natural place apart from an unnatural civilization. As Environmental Historian William Cronon has put it, in wilderness people sense the

freedom to “recover the true selves... lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives.”² Wilderness seems to provide authentic experiences unattainable in civilization.

Yet, as Cronon also explains and this thesis demonstrates, “[f]ar from being a place that stands apart from humanity, it [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation.” Cronon asserts, “[t]here is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness.” In fact, as a “product of ... civilization ... [wilderness] could hardly be contaminated by the stuff of which it is made.” Instead of being “a pristine sanctuary ... without the contamination of civilization,” wilderness has been invented, constructed, and mythologized.³

Nevertheless, that wilderness is a socially constructed myth which can convey meaning even in the absence of its tangible fact is no reason to doubt its potency. Wilderness’s existence as an a priori reality surely can be questioned. Yet, that is not a reason to doubt its influence as myth or story. The argument of this chapter will hinge on the assertion that mythology, along with the human proclivity to tell stories and create works of art, can help account for the power of wilderness experiences.

Thru-Hiking as a Game

To become engrossed in the narrative of traveling through an awe-filled world they did not create, thru-hikers constructed a game. All forms of wilderness recreation will not unequivocally fall under the categorization of a game. Yet, a premeditated hike where a hiker attempts to traverse from one specific location to another does.

Searle’s distinction between regulative and constitutive rules and the role of constitutive rules in games will be useful to explicate this argument.⁴ “Regulative rules,” according to Searle, “regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of

behavior”.⁵ They derive from physical facts and exist without need of institutional regulations to define or label results. These rules regulate behaviors that are logically independent of the rules themselves. They are obvious in that they occur without contextual stipulation and can be specified even in the absence of a rule. For instance, as in an example Searle used: if you want to catch a fish you ought to use hook made of steel rather than butter. Through observation this rule codifies behaviors derived from natural occurrences. Moreover, even without explicit knowledge of the rule, it is still possible to understand the rule’s result—fishermen fish with steel hooks.

“Constitutive rules,” conversely, “do not merely regulate, they [also] create new forms of behavior.” They rely on institutional regulations to specify the meaning of results and ends. Without these institutional regulations results are unintelligible. Constitutive rules, as Searle puts it, “offers ... part of the definition of an occurrence.” For instance, constitutive rules often rely on the formation: “X counts as Y in context C.” As in another example Searle used, a touchdown counts as six points in the context of an American football game. Unlike a regulative rule that results in people fishing with steel hooks, achieving a six point touchdown only makes sense within the institution and constitutive rules of football. Fishing with a steel hook instead of a butter hook does not need contextual stipulations to make sense. A touchdown, however, does not make sense in the absence of the constitutive rules of football.⁶

As Searle pointed out, a person watching an American football game unaware of the institution of American football could discern only regulative rules. They could gather cause and effect relationships such as when the ball gets carried into the far rectangles the crowd will cheer. However, without awareness of the institution of

football and its constitutive rules, this spectator would be unable to understand what a touchdown meant to the cheering crowd. Only with knowledge of football's constitutive rules does a touchdown become intelligible. The same can be said for instances in countless other games i.e. a straight in poker, checkmate in chess, a three-pointer in basketball, etc.

In hiking from point A to point B through the backcountry regulative rules abound.⁷ Unlike games built from the dust of a gymnasium floor, the "natural" rules of the physical world seem to dominate. Carrying a pack and proper rations, pitching a tent, or starting a fire each appears discernible without reliance on constitutive rules. Furthermore, because dealing with regulative rules seem part of the allure of hiking and because a hike's constitutive rule(s) appear rather simple, its' conventional aspects perhaps becomes harder to see than with other games. Yet, the behavior of setting out from point A to terminus B by foot over allocated rugged terrain is born of the constitutive rule(s) which determine the goal and permissible means of an intended hike. Hundreds of hikers travel to the terminuses of the Appalachian Trail each year in Maine and in Georgia to attempt a thru-hike of the entire the AT. Only within the institution of thru-hiking, however, does the attempt to walk the entire trail become intelligible. It is a goal-driven activity whose means are confined to humanly constructed limitations. If we were to remove the institution of thru-hiking and the constitutive rule(s) which state that a thru-hike can only be achieved by traversing the entire trail afoot the significance of the hike would dissolve. If the rules of football were abolished, players could no longer play football. Likewise, thru-hiking only makes sense in the presence of its constitutive rule(s).

Further delving into the nature of games we can find a combination of distinct characteristics that align thru-hiking with this type of activity. Suits directly attempted to explicate the characteristics of games in his text *The Grasshopper*. He realized that games stood in stark contrast to work, where optimal efficiency was the primary objective. In games people embrace inefficiency, purposely creating barriers just so that they can try to overcome them. Suits even theorized that in Utopia, where everyone had everything they needed and desired, people would still need something to do. The solution, he determined, would be to devise artificial obstacles, e.g. games. Games thus made life in Utopia intelligible and meaningful, leading Suits to assert that game playing constituted the ideal existence.⁸

Scott Kretchmar offers a useful interpretation of Suits. Taking an anthropological point of view Kretchmar posited that human beings have evolved over millions of years to be problem solvers. Born with biological pre-inclinations to overcome obstacles, humans cannot help but “find significance in negotiating problems” and presently “cannot live happily without the meaning that is thereby derived.”⁹ And, as Suits portrayed, if our biological proclivities have no immediate outlets, humans will construct puzzles to occupy themselves. Games appear a viable, even an inevitable, outcome of progress.

In his definition Suits thus came up with four criteria that branded an activity a game. Each appears essential to thru-hiking. First, a game must have a specific goal or state of affairs established before the game is actually underway. Suits called this a “prelusory goal.” In the case of thru-hiking the prelusory goal seems obvious; hikers aim to reach in a safe and reasonable time the allocated end of their traverse, Springer or

Katahdin respectfully. Second, as Searle realized, to reach the prelusory goal, participants can only use the means permitted by constitutive rules. As we have already observed, abiding by the constitutive rule that one must walk an allocated distance over rugged terrain makes a hike an intelligible activity. Third, differentiating games from other activities, the means permitted by the constitutive rule(s) must be “narrower in range than they would be in the absence of the rules.” That is, the means permitted must be less efficient than those actually available. Thus, although a horse, bicycle, car, bus, or plane might be available to help a thru-hiker to reach their prelusory goal, they must travel by foot to their desired destination in order complete a thru-hike. Fourth and finally, for an activity to be considered a game, gamers must have what Suits called a “lusory attitude.” This means they must accept the rules of a game *because* they make the game possible - just as a thru-hiker chooses to travel by foot so that they can be in the act of thru-hiking. Acknowledging these characteristics, as Suits tersely put it, “A game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”¹⁰ Thru-hiking seems to fit this mold.

Some might argue that the requirement that one walk is not a limitation at all. In truth, although the requirement of walking seems to limit means, when traveling over especially rugged terrain in a vast and uninhabited area, walking may in fact be the most efficient means available. Yet, as Suits offered as a caveat, even if “no overt act prohibiting more efficient in favor of less efficient means [is] made, that [is] precisely the effect of choosing [a] more difficult goal.” Suits states that “there is no difference in principle between creating a challenge by an artificial prohibition of more efficient means to a goal and artificially choosing a goal just because the means for its achievement

present a greater challenge than do the means for achieving a different goal.” In the case of a thru-hike, choosing to walk over an allocated terrain to a distant specified destination has precisely this challenge creating effect.¹¹

From Suits’s formalist perspective, it might also be argued that thru-hiking does not set constitutive rules and limit means stringently enough to make the endeavor indisputably a game. As the incompatibility thesis of formalism argues, the constitutive rules of a game are inseparable from that game’s ends. If a player does not follow a game’s rules to the letter, then they are no longer actually playing the game. Moreover, if there are no absolute constitutive rules to abide by, an activity can not really be considered a game. There is a fine line between what does and does not count as a game. Thru-hiking, it might seem, is nothing more than a demanding natural activity with a few constitutive stipulations.

However, a more pragmatic approach proves more effective in describing how games actually function. Indeed, Searle’s notion of constitutive rules was more flexible than the strict formalism employed by Suits. Formalism provides helpful conceptual clarity, yet it ultimately fails to consider how games work on the ground. The regulative - constitutive distinction was at the heart of Searle’s *Speech Acts* in which he argued that languages function as rule governed activities made up of constitutive rules. When Searle described the way constitutive rules worked in language he did not hold that if we break any particular rule we automatically fail to function within said language. Nor did he hold that every rule of a language must remain intact for said language to remain functionally intact. Sticking with games as an analogy he noted, “a slight change” in the “fringe rules” of a game does not make it “a different game.” As he put it, “there will be

degrees of centrality in any system of constitutive rules.”¹² Because Searle was concerned with functionality some “fringe” rules could be altered and even broken in a language, yet it could still offer an effective means of communication within a group. It is likewise with games. As Kretchmar posits, we should be “less concerned about whether [a game] convention continues to exist (given some rule change or violation) and more concerned about whether or not, or to what degree, it (or its mutant form) still works.”¹³ From this perspective, as long as an artificial obstacle retains its meaning-creating potential for participants than its functionality as a game need not be questioned.

Some rules will certainly be more fundamental than others. Indeed, this is where regulative rules that take physics and logic into account often come into play. For instance, if the pitcher’s mound in baseball were moved to 10 feet from home plate getting on base in baseball would become nearly impossible. This alteration to the original constitutive rule that the mound must be 60 feet and 6 inches away would likely ruin the intended function of baseball. Yet, there appear many practical examples to show altering a constitutive rule does not always ruin a game. For instance, college baseball players are allowed to hit with metal bats. Professionals must use wooden ones. This alteration does not seem to degrade the challenge of getting on base in the same way moving the distance of the mound from home plate would. In the case of metal and wooden bats, though the rules differ the game continues to fulfill its function.¹⁴

Admitting that game conventions get “honed over time... to become more effective in carrying out their functions” we see, as Kretchmar ultimately concludes, that we constantly engage game conventions “with an eye for improving them.”¹⁵ This, once again, seems precisely how thru-hikers engage their game. They can determine distances

to traverse, ruggedness of terrain, time frame allowed, whether they must stay on trail or simply travel from one point to another continuously afoot. Some may allow themselves to resupply in towns while others prohibit it. Some may allow themselves to hitch rides to towns to resupply or skip a section, while others prohibit such assistance. If terrain becomes unexpectedly hazardous and impassable the chosen route may be altered to fit a hiker's capacities. No matter the specifics of the conventions, using implied rules or explicit ones, thru-hikers purposefully constructed meaning-creating endeavors with the help of constitutive rules. Although the exact nature of the artificial problem may differ, as long as we recognize thru-hiking as artificial and functionally meaningful, we should have no qualms classifying thru-hiking as a game with its integrity intact.

Furthermore, this notion of games does not damage the mythic potential of a thru-hike. Of course, if central constitutive rules are broken, the experience of being in wilderness will be harmed and the functional effect of a thru-hike may dissolve. Nonetheless, by constructing a suitable challenge many hikers seem enabled to enjoy wilderness experiences. Indeed, games, artificial though they may be, can be taken quite seriously. As Kretchmar has recently argued "there is something disingenuous and unhelpful in reminding a sportsperson [game player] that [an] activity is 'only a game.'"¹⁶ Genuinely giving ourselves to the drama of a game, even though in "normal" life it may seem irrational, is central to the meanings we find in them. To make his claim concerning the value of seriousness in games, Kretchmar employed Polanyi's theory of "tacit knowledge" and a "frame." Similarly, although a thru-hike is shot through with human innovations, including game conventions, by giving themselves wholly to their

game and allowing themselves to be “taken away” by the “story” of traveling through wilderness, thru-hikers can enjoy experiences of “actually” being in the wild.

Tacit Knowledge

The crux of Polanyi’s theoretical explanation of knowledge and meaning was that human beings experience two types of awareness. One type he called tacit or subsidiary awareness. Tacit awareness, according to Polanyi, produces the second type which he called focal awareness. The personal collection of subsidiaries through hands-on experience generates a store of tacit (or subsidiary) knowledge too complicated and vast in scope to fully explicate. These implicit subsidiaries, Polanyi argued, play a role in the in all forms of explicit knowledge that becomes apparent in focal awareness. Thus, focal awareness refers to what we come to know consciously, of what is made explicit. Yet, while we find the explicable world within our focal awareness, we only are able to realize things focally because of our subsidiary awareness. We tacitly know *from* our subsidiaries *to* our focal awareness.¹⁷

Because of their complexity of use and because they are the source of focal awareness, tacit subsidiaries necessarily remain implicit and un-analyzable. According to Polanyi, we only know of tacit knowledge because of the focal awareness it generates. When we alter how we integrate subsidiaries or when we turn our attention from an object of focal awareness to the copious subsidiaries that brought it about the original object of focus begins to dissolve from attention. A simple analogy for this is writing with a pen. The hand acts as a source of subsidiary awareness as the tip of the pen becomes the object of focal awareness. The pen’s point is easily maneuvered while focal attention is on it, even though the hand is what actually produces the movement. If a

writer turns critically from the pen's point to the movements of the hand, her or his ability to maneuver the pen skillfully diminishes. Furthermore, as the focus of attention dissolves it becomes impossible to extract and analyze the precise role subsidiaries played in producing it. As Polanyi would say, our subsidiaries work analogously to spectacles. They are a source of unified vision. We know from them, but our spectacles cannot examine themselves.

Because of similar biological make-ups, the subsidiaries collected by individuals work in equivalent ways. Yet, since no two people have the exact same biology (identical biological twins perhaps being an exception) and (or) the exact same experiences in the world (something not even experienced by twins), subsidiaries will also work in unique quality, quantity, and order. Thus, the result of acknowledging the role of tacit knowledge is that we must also admit that all knowledge is, to some extent, personal. With the acknowledgement of tacit knowledge's role in the personal production of focal awareness rich relationships of meaning become apparent. Polanyi gives great weight to the ability to creatively and imaginatively combine subsidiaries into a coherent whole. As he put it, the "focal target on which they [the subsidiaries] bear *is the meaning* of the subsidiaries."¹⁸ Thus, by the personal integration of subsidiaries, inexplicable tacit knowledge produces resonant, if not explicit, meaning.

The way a person skillfully handles an object and the way they conceptually understand an object work in a similar fashion. Indeed, Polanyi claims that meanings found in metaphors, art, and even religious experiences arise in focal awareness due to subsidiary awareness in the same way the skillful maneuvering of a pen would. In the case of a conceptual coherence, again we know from multitudes of subsidiaries to focal

awareness. In the case of a poem for instance, tacit knowledge's integration in focal awareness produces the essence of a poem's meaning. Moreover, looking from subsidiaries differently or trying to focus on the subsidiaries themselves, turning from a poem as a whole to a critical analysis of its wording, syntax, and other constitutive parts, will diminish the poem's significance. Focal awareness will dissolve and the subsidiaries that brought it about will lose their meaning as subsidiaries.

A Frame

While Polanyi claims all knowledge works this way, he pointed out that moral judgments, creations of art, and religious experiences rely on imaginative integrations of subsidiaries to create coherent meanings. Because of their reliance on imaginative connections of various disparate subsidiaries, these types of experiences differ from the more easily explicable meanings produced by connections made by a scientist, for instance. As Polanyi posits, to find meaning in more imaginative endeavors requires what he called a "frame." A frame refers to a proper context and the requisite willingness that will allow a person to be "carried away" by a work of art, a story, a song, a film, a play, a poem, or a religious experience. One must be willing to give themselves to a frame in order to allow its drama to be experienced as "real." If proper subsidiaries are present and a person gives themselves fully to a frame, they will be able to "live" it.

Thus, within focal awareness a person carried away by a frame can experience the meanings which the imaginative integration of subsidiaries brings about. The notes of a Beethoven symphony, the strokes of Picasso, the words of Steinbeck, the lyrics of hymns sung by a church choir, or the many manipulated facets of a film hold little relevance until they are experienced as an integrated whole within a frame. When they are,

however, the dramas they produce appear difficult to deny. Yet when we turn our attention from the whole of a symphony to its notes, from a poem to its constitutive parts, or from a film to its artificial facets, their meanings begin to disintegrate. The unified focal awareness a frame brings will dissolve and the meaning will thus dissipate.

These “*transnatural*” imaginative integrations extend to mythology. Indeed, Polanyi takes a theological bent, asserting that as with the meanings in poems, paintings, or films, meanings in myths can be considered “real” within a proper frame. “Myth is an all-encompassing work of art,” Polanyi writes, “which like any other great works of art fills its subjects with inexhaustible significance.” While he admits that myths “are clearly works of the imagination,” this does not lead Polanyi to disregard their validity.

Mythologies “in truth like the truth of works of art, can consist only in their power to evoke in us an experience which we hold to be genuine,” Polanyi claimed.¹⁹ If we did not find some sort of integrative meaningful truth in myths or games, we would not keep telling them or playing them. Even if intangible, inexplicable, and beyond “natural” form, the meanings our subsidiaries create within a proper frame can have a considerable impact.

Wilderness as a Frame

It may be possible to apply Polanyi’s notions of tacit knowledge and frames to our understanding of what draws thru-hikers to attempt to traverse the entire AT. Thru-hikers take part in an activity reliant on human technologies, which includes constitutive rules of human design. They tread and artificially constructed trail, carry human made equipment, designate a goal and its permissible means. Yet, they often experience themselves in a natural world apart from human influences. Indeed, it seems that the

meanings found in wilderness are akin to the meanings found in art and religion. In an ironic twist, wilderness appears more a product of *transnatural* integrations and science more a product of natural ones.²⁰ Calling “upon... imaginative powers to integrate incompatible matters into a joint meaning,” as Polanyi describe the process, thru-hikers become enabled to experience a coherent separation from civilization during a trek.²¹ By the imaginative integration of non-reducible tacit knowledge within a frame, the experience of wilderness can arise in focal awareness. Hikers can become carried away just as others become carried away by paintings, poems, stories, or religious experiences. In such instances, the story of venturing forth in pioneer fashion into an unknown and awe-filled world that can be treated as “real” becomes meaningful.

As Polanyi described, when we watch a play “we accept the clues which the play offers to the imagination for sharing its meaning, and we live in this meaning rather than the meaning these events would have for us in our ‘interested lives.’”²² In the same way that tacit knowledge allows us to be carried away by the frame of a play so that we perceive the drama on stage as meaningful; hikers can get carried away by the frame of wilderness which will allow them to experience the mythical wild as real and meaningful. The key to being carried away by a play is to experience the drama taking place on stage as “really” happening. Likewise, the key to being carried away by wilderness (and thus enabled to enjoy hiking) is to experience an environment as “really” separated from civilization via the willful suspension of disbelief.

Because a frame is predicated on personal knowledge, what becomes wilderness in one’s focal attention may vary between individuals. For instance, someone who grew up in New York City and someone who grew up in Alaska may tacitly “know”

wilderness differently. Again, through comparison to art this assertion makes sense.

While the frame of a poem, song, or play may offer the potential for one person to be carried away, for another person the context of the frame may simply appear dull. Such a person could not get carried away from normal life even if she or he wanted too.

Moreover, if thru-hikers engulfed in a wilderness frame were to critically examine the subsidiaries that brought about the frame they would find civilization everywhere. By focusing on their mechanisms of integration, they may gain some knowledge of the frame's parts. Nevertheless, they will ultimately lose their awareness of the integration itself. How the parts could have produced the integrated experience in focal awareness will then appear inexplicable. Indeed, by attempting to explicate tacit knowledge, along with dissecting components such as trails, maps, compasses, equipment, food, clothing, etc. etc., the ultimate presence of human civilization – oneself as the source of the frame and the game – would cause the frame to dissolve. The subsidiaries that brought wilderness to focal awareness would lose their meaning.

As with the standards of art, wilderness's acceptance as "real" must, in Polanyi's terminology, be "grounded *on the judgments of its maker*, interacting, it is true, with both tradition and the public's present inclinations, but nevertheless interacting by and through the maker's own judgments."²³ While this means experiences of wilderness may vary between individuals, it is important to note that this does not mean wilderness or art are merely artifices. Within a wilderness frame, imagination and the tacit combinations of subsidiaries come together to create "wilderness" in focal awareness. As with art, and games generally, we should take the meanings of such integrations seriously. If we can accept a terrain of woods, rocks, and dirt, the sounds of birds and bugs, the reliance on

relatively minimal and unique technological devices, the solitude, the physical exertion, the smells, and the like to be a suitable frame which might carry a willing thru-hiker away into an experience of “actually” being separated from society, it should be easy to see how wilderness is indeed the product of a frame that can provide dramatic and meaning filled experiences on the Appalachian Trail. The context just needs to be right and the willingness present.²⁴ As with works of art, games, and mythologies, in varying ways wilderness can become a dynamic facet for personal narratives.

Imagined Wilderness

This understanding of wilderness can be far reaching and have significant influence over how we construct our ideas about nature and wilderness recreation. Contemporary environmental activist Bill McKibben has argued that because the ecological processes of the biosphere can “no longer” be regard as “entirely the work of some separate, uncivilizable force” nature has fundamentally changed. The ecology of the earth, he asserts, has become “a product of our [human] habits, our economies, [and] our ways of life.” Because post-industrial society has “deprived nature of its independence” McKibben proclaims that nature has lost its meaning. Yet as McKibben himself put it, “Nature... is durable in our imagination. Wildness, the idea of wildness, has outlasted the exploration of the entire globe.”²⁵ The notion that idealized wilderness has outlasted human exploration and control over the earth seems, on reflections, to have some merit.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to assert that wilderness persisting merely in our imaginations equates to a reality where wilderness has disappeared. This view is too simplistic and too ahistorical. Wild nature has not ended. It is where it has always been, in human awareness and indeed in human imaginations.

Being in wilderness appears predicated on the absence of humanity but our civilization is never truly absent. Hikers who experience wilderness and then attempt to critically analyze its subsidiary sources will see wilderness dissolve in the midst of civilization at every corner. However, human innovations and conventions need not ruin wilderness. They certainly do not need to make stirring experiences of an uncontrollable universe impossible. Indeed, by providing access to a suitable frame they bring it to life. The right equipment, a well-built trail, and a sufficiently challenging game, can spur thru-hikers to imaginatively employ tacit knowledge within a wilderness frame and experience “real” wilderness.

As scholars delve into the origins and emergence of recreational activities that rely on a sense of wilderness we need not argue over whether it is possible to employ the innovations and conventions of civilization and simultaneously experience separation from it. While taken hold of by a wilderness frame thru-hikers tacitly employ human-made conventions and technologies and concurrently experience what has come to be known as wilderness within their focal awareness. Instead of leaving a world of human designs for a world without such creations, thru-hikers appear to tacitly *use* human designs to create “storied” worlds unencumbered by civilizations burdens.

Conclusion – Freedom and Authenticity Reconsidered

Throughout this thesis, the prevalence of the notion that the wild is separated from society seems the most intriguing. This thinking is intellectually flawed. A thru-hike, and wilderness recreation generally, ought to be considered as occurring neatly within the confines of civilization. That a large portion of Americans suddenly decided to gain authentic experiences by taking vacations from civilization speaks to changing perceptions of society. The desire for freedom and authenticity has permeated American culture. The emergence of thru-hiking on the AT sheds some light on the complexities and contradictions intertwined within these far from simple ideals.

Thru-hikers questioned the amounts of freedom and genuineness society allowed them to experience. They adhered to a faith that personal freedom could be found. Indeed, they believed they could find truth on their own on the AT. At the same time, they doubted freedom and authenticity were equally accessible in the grind of their normal, overly mediated, and controlled lives. Thru-hikers equated the AT to wildness and wildness to realness and realness to personal fulfillment. Most thru-hikers, however, looked for truth without questioning their own assumptions. Personal fulfillment in and of itself was enough to justify their endeavor. Hikers trusted intuitive experience while obvious challenges to these perceptions persisted.

On a trail once meant to foster community, thru-hikers found fulfillment on their mostly solitary journeys. The AT had initially been devised as a place to alter perspectives about society, yet for thru-hikers it became a place for individuals to learn about themselves while dominant social structures remained unchallenged. The long-distance-trekkers envision themselves functioning for a period of time apart from

civilized social and cultural forces. Nevertheless, social and cultural forces clearly impacted how thru-hikers understood their trek. At the same time, thru-hikers brought new expensive technologies to a human-made trail, aiming to achieve an artificially created objective. While they willingly became carried away by the frame of wilderness, thru-hikers bypassed a critical consideration of larger contexts. For better or worse, the pretense of wild nature misconstrued the nature of the hike, opening the door for an abdication of social responsibility. While in many ways a thru-hike may have led to an increased awareness of the world, in other ways it may have hindered awareness as well.

Perhaps most telling of all is that these issues never seemed to enter thru-hikers minds. To AT thru-hikers, as to many Americans who came of age in the “Me Decade,” personal freedom superseded, or at least preceded community empowerment. By taking this perspective hikers were enabled to spend months at a time on the AT satisfying their own desires for their own good. Yet, from this position of privilege the tension between community and narcissism did not seem to bother thru-hikers in the slightest.

Because thru-hiking provided an outlet for a select few while ignoring--perhaps even denying--broader social factors, a number of questions should be raised. The emergence of thru-hiking begs us to consider – where does freedom and authenticity ultimately lie? Where and how should they be achieved? Should freedom be found on an individual basis first and foremost; or should it be based on the rights of a community as a whole? Is the best route to freedom and authenticity found by individuals focusing on their specific circumstances? Might it be better to consider larger contexts first?

When the larger society is taken into account, the freedom and authenticity found on a thru-hike becomes problematic. Not only does the activity seem self-centered and

disconnected from greater social issues, it raises concerns about personal freedom as well. After all, can the best way to experience freedom and authenticity really be the pretense of leaving society? Any authenticity found on the AT seems to disregard the lives most thru-hikers actually lived. That is, the lives they left behind and inevitably returned to when they went back to “civilization.” As a mere vacation, one must wonder if the freedom and authenticity found on a thru-hike can really be deemed as legitimate as freedoms and authentic experiences found in everyday social life.

These are questions and consideration that call for further research, reflection, and deliberation. This inquiry has elucidated the reasons and motivations that led hundreds of people to undertake a 2,000+ mile continuous hike. Admittedly, whether or not intense personalized physical recreational endeavors that entertain contact with underdeveloped lands for prolonged periods of time can promote real freedom and authenticity remains an open question. While the rise of thru-hiking on the AT reaffirms the presence of individual freedom and personal authenticity as dominant values within American culture, it also exemplifies how slippery freedom and authenticity can be. As challenging as it may be to achieve genuine freedom and authenticity, it seems equally as difficult to define them.

End Notes

Introduction

¹ I cannot say where and when the shortened initials “AT” came into usage, but Edward Garvey, who wrote the first influential how-to thru-hike text, used the term often. See Edward Garvey, *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* (Oakton VA: Appalachian Books, 1971). The term was used before Garvey, but was almost universally employed by thru-hikers in the 1970s.

² Earl Shaffer, *Walking with Spring: The Story that Inspired Thousands of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers* (Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1981), 8; The exact length of the AT has changed overtime due to relocations. I refer to a thru-hike as a two-thousand-mile hike or a “2,000+ mile hike” throughout this thesis as an approximation. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the AT presently is “roughly” 2,180 miles long. See <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail> [accessed 17 July 2012].

³ The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (previously called the Appalachian Trail Conference) is a non-profit organization which organizes the maintenance of the AT. For more on the mission and vision of the Conservancy see <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/who-we-are> [Accessed 13 July 2012]

⁴ 2,000 Milers,” <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers> [Accessed 15 May 2012].

⁵ Six months is an approximation. According to the ATC it takes the majority of thru-hikers five to seven months to thru-hike the AT. The average is six months. See <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/hiking/thru-section-hiking/faqs> [Accessed 16 July 2012].

⁶ William Cronon makes a compelling argument for this in “William Cronon, The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 69-90, quotation from 69. For the political aim he has in mind see note 3 of chapter six.

Chapter One

¹ Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 10.

² William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 69-90, quotation from 69.

³ *Appalachian Conference Member Handbook (11th Edition)*, (Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1978), 5, 23.

⁴ When I refer to “American civilization” or “American society” I am referring to the civilization and social constructions of the European decedents whose ancestors traveled to North America over the Atlantic. This is not to discount that civilization in North America existed before the Europeans arrived. It did. But for practical purposes in this thesis “American civilization” refers to the society and conventions built by the Europeans and their decedents.

⁵ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁶ John Josselyn, *Rarities of New-England Discovered* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1672), 4.

⁷ Nash provides an account of the origins of this thinking on pages 8-22 of *Wilderness and the American Mind*. The full passage from Genesis 1:28 is - “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground;’” From the New International Version (NIV), (Biblica Inc., 2011).

⁸ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonialist, and the Ecology of New England*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 53-57.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170, 159, 161. The notion that European civilization, not human civilization in general, changed New England’s landscape in drastic and specific way is an overarching claim of Cronon’s text.

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: The Century Co., 1898; orig. 1835), 90.

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- ¹² Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 23 - 43, quotes from 42, 41.
- ¹³ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963; orig. 1959), 3.
- ¹⁴ Edmund Burke's 1757 work *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin or Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* formally depicted the "sublime" as an experience of awe stemming from fear and danger caused by contact with nature. For Burke's influence on European perceptions see Robert MacFarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventure in Reaching the Summit* (New York: Random House Inc., 2003), 74-77.
- ¹⁵ William Gilpin introduced the "picturesque" as pleasing qualities found in nature's irregularities and seeming disfigurements. His best known work on the subject is William Gilpin and Thomas Dick Lauder, *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views* (Edinburgh: Fraser, 1834; orig. 1792).
- ¹⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, p. 44-66; for the emergence of romantic ideas about mountains and mountainous landscapes in English literature see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*.
- ¹⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 67-83; Gerald Brought Jr. Lowery, *Benton MacKaye's Appalachian Trail as a Cultural Symbol*, 36 - 40.
- ¹⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 78-83.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *The Atlantic Monthly Magazine*, 7 (January 1836): 6, 4.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²¹ Laura and Guy Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag: A History of Hiking, Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club: Boston, 1989), 69-77, quotation from 70.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 74-77.
- ²³ Thomas Starr King, *The White Hills: Their Legend, Landscape, and Poetry* (Boston, MA: Estes and Lauriat, 1887; orig. 1859), 104, 383, 156.
- ²⁴ Ian Marshal, *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), see 54 for an example of hikers both literally and metaphorically carrying Thoreau's words with them.
- ²⁵ David Brill, *As Far As the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Nashville, Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1990), see 14 for an instance of a thru-hiker directly addressing Thoreau.
- ²⁶ Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39.
- ²⁷ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 3-6.
- ²⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 84-90.
- ²⁹ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*, ed. William Rossi, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2008), 260-287, quotations from 260, 262, 264, 265. The version of "Walking" as quoted here is based on reprint from an 1862 publication in *Atlantic Monthly*. It is worth noting that many speculate this printed version is not an exact replication of Thoreau's 1851 talk in Concord.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, quotations from 268, 273, 274, 275.
- ³¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 90-95, quotation from 94.
- ³² Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Boston: Tinker and Felids, 1864), 62-64.
- ³³ Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 175.
- ³⁴ For the role of conservationism see Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 138-156 and Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). For Muir and preservationists sentiments see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 122-140.
- ³⁵ Martin V. Melosi, "The Environmental Crises in the City: The Relationship between Industrialization and Urban Pollution," in *Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 1870-1930*, ed. Martin V. Melosi (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1980), 3-30.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ³⁷ Fredrick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1921) quotations from, 244-245, 261.
- ³⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 141-160, quotation from 157. For sport as a replacement for nature in cities see Mark Dyreson, "Nature By Design: Modern American Ideas About,

Sports Energy, Evolution, and Republics, 1856-1920,” *Journal of Sport History*, 26 (fall 1999): 447-468. For the history of summer camps see Abigail A. Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix-41.

³⁹ Melosi, “The Environmental Crises in the City,” 8

⁴⁰ Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag*, 145-147.

⁴¹ Ibid; for the rationalization of contact with nature see Dyreson, *Nature By Design*

⁴² Ibid., 183-198.

⁴³ Ibid., 199-208.

⁴⁴ Laura and Guy Waterman, “Early Founders of the Appalachian Trail,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 44 (Sept – Oct 1983), p. 7-11.

⁴⁵ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*.

⁴⁶ Aldo Leopold, “Wilderness As A Form of Land Use,” *Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics*, 1 (October 1925): 398.

⁴⁷ Thoreau, “Walking,” 265.

Chapter Two

¹ Benton MacKaye, “Outdoor Culture: The Philosophy of Through Trails,” *Landscape Architecture* 17 (April 1927): 163-174.

² Myron H. Avery, “The Appalachian Trail,” reprinted from *Mountain Magazine*, February 1930, p. 3.

³ Mark Dyreson, *Making the American Team: Sport Culture and the Olympic Experience*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

⁴ Brian B. King, “Trail Years: A History of the Appalachian Trail Conference,” *Appalachian Trailway News 57th Anniversary Issue*, 5.

⁵ Ronald Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” *Geographical Review* 77 (January 1987): 76-85; Paul Sutter, ““A Retreat from Profit’: Colonization, The Appalachian Trail and the Social Roots of Benton MacKaye’s Wilderness Advocacy,” *Environmental History*, 4 (October 1999): 553-577.

⁶ Foresta and Sutter have some disagreement about the effectiveness of MacKaye’s idea. Both agree, however, there was a tension between what MacKaye envisioned and what the ATC built. This tension as well as Foresta and Sutter’s perspectives on it will be discussed later in the chapter.

⁷ Dorothy M. Martin, “Interview with Benton MacKaye,” *Potomac Appalachian Trail Club Bulletin*, 22 (January-March 1953): 12-13.

⁸ Laura and Guy Waterman, “Early Founders of the Appalachian Trail,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, Sept-Oct, p. 7-11; Laura and Guy Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag: A History of Hiking Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1989), 183, 485.

⁹ Samuel Hays *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

¹⁰ Paul Sutter, ““A Retreat from Profit,”” 555.

¹¹ Larry Anderson, *Benton MacKaye: Conservationist, Planner, and Creator of the Appalachian Trail* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

¹² Ibid., 92

¹³ National Volunteer Committee on Industrial Administration, “The Northwest Program: Preliminary Outline,” broadside, 1920, MacKaye Papers, Dartmouth College Library, as cited in Anderson, *Benton MacKaye*, 129.

¹⁴ Benton MacKaye, “A Suggested Clearing House for Radicals,” c. 1919-1920, p. 218, as cited in Anderson *Benton MacKaye*, 130.

¹⁵ Benton MacKaye, “Regional Planning and Social Readjustment,” 1921, p. 18, as cited in Anderson *Benton MacKaye*, 146.

¹⁶ Benton MacKaye, “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning,” *Journal of American Institute of Architects*, 9 (October 1921): 325 – 330.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Waterman and Waterman, “Early Founders of the Appalachian Trail,” 10-11.

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- ¹⁹ Glenn D. Scherer, *Vistas & Visions – A History of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference*, (New York: New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, 1995).
- ²⁰ Anderson *Benton MacKaye*, 160-161.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 158.
- ²² Benton MacKaye, “Progress toward the Appalachian Trail,” *Appalachia*, 15 (December 1922): 244-246.
- ²³ Scherer, *Vistas & Visions*.
- ²⁴ Anderson, *Benton MacKaye*, 152.
- ²⁵ Benton MacKaye, “Great Appalachian Trail from New Hampshire to the Carolinas,” *New York Times*, 18 February, 1923, p. 15.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Anderson, *Benton MacKaye*, 159-160.
- ²⁹ Raymond H. Torrey, “Great Trail for Hikers Grows in Appalachia,” *New York Times*, 5 May 1929, p. 8.
- ³⁰ Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 76-85.
- ³¹ “Brief of Proceedings of the Appalachian Trail Conference,” Called by the Federated Societies on Planning and Parks, Hotel Raleigh, Washington D.C., March 2 and 3, 1925, Harvard University Library of the Schools of Landscape Architecture and City Planning.
- ³² King, “Trail Years,” 7-9.
- ³³ Benton MacKaye, “Outdoor Culture: The Philosophy of Through Trails,” *Landscape Architecture* 17 (April 1927): 163-174.
- ³⁴ King, “Trail Years,” 7; According to King, Perkins was so moved by the speech he requested to hear MacKaye give it a second time a year later.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ³⁶ Robert A. Rubin, “the Short Brilliant Life of Myron Avery,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, July 2000, p. 22-29.
- ³⁷ Anderson, *Benton MacKaye*, 226.
- ³⁸ Myron H. Avery, “The Appalachian Trail,” reprinted from *Mountain Magazine*, February 1930, 3.
- ³⁹ King, “Trail Years,” 11.
- ⁴⁰ MacKaye as quoted in Anderson, *Benton MacKaye*, 280.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 282
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 281-283; See these pages in Anderson for greater detail on the MacKaye – Avery correspondence.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Ronald M. Fisher, *Appalachian Trail*, (National Geographic, 1972), 5; in the forward to Fisher’s book MacKaye (age 93) calls the AT “unrivaled by any single feat in the development of American outdoor recreation” and states that he is “proud of the generations of hikers who have made my dream become a reality.” That MacKaye was first and foremost proud of AT “hikers” and not trail builders is telling. Indeed, he had not wholly embraced selective memory. While he recognized “countless individuals – notably volunteer workers and cooperative landowners,” when he mentioned specific names of people who he stated “contributed as much to getting the project launched as I,” he felt no need to include Avery.
- ⁴⁵ Sarah Mittlefehldt, *The Tangles Roots of the Appalachian Trail: A Social and Environmental History*, (University of Wisconsin: dissertation, 2008), 55.
- ⁴⁶ Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 82.
- ⁴⁷ Benton MacKaye, “A New England Recreation Plan,” *Journal of Forestry*, December 1929, pp. 927 – 930.
- ⁴⁸ Foresta, “Transformation of the Appalachian Trail,” 84.
- ⁴⁹ Sutter, “A Retreat from Profit,” 555.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 560, 570.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Anderson *Benton MacKaye*, 267-284.
- ⁵² For more on this see Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Washington University Press, 2002): 142-193.

Chapter Three

¹ Brian B. King, "Trail Years: A History of the Appalachian Trail Conference," *Appalachian Trailway News: 75th Anniversary Edition* (Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2000), 12.

² Larry Anderson, *Benton MacKaye: Conservationist, Planner, and Creator of the Appalachian Trail* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 364.

³ Myron Avery, "Reports of the Chairman Myron H. Avery to the Ninth Appalachian Trail Conference (August 18, 1939)," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 1 (January 1940): 18

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978)

⁶ Laura and Guy Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag: A History of Hiking, Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club 1989), 511, 514-519.

⁷ Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 26, 39.

⁸ Ibid., 40, 47, 52.

⁹ Appalachian Trail Conservancy, "Appalachian Trail 2000 miler Application," (September 2005), <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/docs/default-document-library/2012-a-t-2000-miler-application-.pdf> [accessed 21 May 2012]

¹⁰ "Records," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 1 (January 1939): 10

¹¹ Raymond H. Torrey, "Great Trail for Hikers Grows in Appalachia," *New York Times*, 5 May 1929, p. 8; Sarah Mittlefehldt, *The Tangles Roots of the Appalachian Trail: A Social and Environmental History* (Wisconsin University: dissertation), 2008, pp. 104-105.

¹² "Records," 10.

¹³ Elmer C. Adams, *Walking in the Clouds* (Detroit: Arnold-Powers, Inc., 1939), quotations from 11, 35, 63, 64-65.

¹⁴ Myron Avery, "Preface," to Adams, *Walking in the Clouds*.

¹⁵ "Extended Walks on Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 2 (May 1941): 21.

¹⁶ Ibid; "Walks from Canada to Georgia," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 3 (September 1942): 48; Nat Winston Jr. and George Mayfield Jr., "Along the Tennessee-North Carolina Line," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 6 (January 1945): 9.

¹⁷ Myron Avery, "Preface" to Adams, *Walking in the Clouds*.

¹⁸ "Extended Trips," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 9 (May 1948): 22-24.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Hikes Appalachian Trail: Man who Left Georgia April 4 Tops Mount Katahdin in Maine," *New York Times*, 6 August 1948, p. 19.

²¹ Earl Shaffer, "Report of Hiking Trip Via Appalachian Trail From Mt. Oglethorpe, Georgia (April 4, 1948) to Mt. Katahdin Maine (August 5, 1948)," Folder "Earl Shaffer," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, Appalachian Trail Conservancy Archives, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. (Hereafter, "ATC Archives"). Please note that the ATC Archives at Harper's Ferry are unofficially. The ATC does not call them an archive but simply refers to them as "the 2,000 miler reports." For practical purposes, since I utilized the 2,000 miler reports as an archive, I will refer to them as such for the remainder of this thesis.

²² "Continuous Trip Overall," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 9 (September 1948): 36.

²³ Earl Shaffer, "The Long Cruise," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 10 (January 1949): 4

²⁴ Earl Shaffer, *Walking with Spring: The Story that Inspired Thousands of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers* (Harpers Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conference, 1981), 8.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Completion of Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 12 (September 1951): 35.

²⁷ Earl Shaffer, "Report of Hiking Trip Via Appalachian Trail From Mt. Oglethorpe," ATC Archives.

²⁸ Shaffer, "The Long Cruise," 4.

²⁹ Shaffer, *Walking with Spring*, 80, 26, 122, 2.

³⁰ "Hikes Appalachian Trail," 19.

³¹ "Georgia to Maine in One Trip," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 10 (January 1949): 4.

³² Shaffer, "The Long Cruise"

- ³³ Laura and Guy Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag*, 641.
- ³⁴ Eugene M. Espy, "I Enjoyed IT," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 13 (January 1952): 3-5.
- ³⁵ "Bill Hall's Back With 'Scalp' Of Hike on Appalachian Trail," *East Liverpool Review (Ohio)*, 25 October 1951, p. 16.
- ³⁶ Espy, "I Enjoyed IT," 3.
- ³⁷ Eugene M. Espy, *The Trail of My Life* (Macon, GA: Indigo Publishing Group, 2008), xv, 55.
- ³⁸ Espy, "I Enjoyed IT," 5.
- ³⁹ Chester Dziengielewski, "North to South," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 13 (January 1952): 5-6.
- ⁴⁰ Martin D. Papendick, "A Michigander Goes the Length of the AT," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 13 (January 1952): 6-7.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² "Other Trail Traverses," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 14 (January 1953): 13.
- ⁴³ George Fredrick Miller, "Equipment and Preparation For My Long Trip," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 14 (January 1953): 6-7.
- ⁴⁴ George Miller to Jean Stephenson, March 14, 1952, Folder "George Miller," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁴⁵ "Umbrella-Carrying Professor of 72 Nearing End of 2,025-mile AT trek," *Knoxville Journal (Tennessee)*, 26 August 1952, Folder "George Miller," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁴⁶ Miller, "Equipment and Preparation for My Long Trip."
- ⁴⁷ George Frederick Miller, "Oglethorpe to Katahdin – Via the Appalachian Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 14 (May 1953): 19-21.
- ⁴⁸ Charles Del Vecchio, "District Hiker, 72, Conquers 2,025 miles Appalachian Trail," *Washington Post*, September 4 or 5, Folder "George Miller, Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives; "Pauses in Hike," *Newport Daily News (Rhode Island)*, 29 August 1952, p. 1.
- ⁴⁹ Jean Stephenson to George Miller, July 30, 1952, Folder "George Miller, Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁵⁰ "Miller Trail Trip Widely Acclaimed," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 14 (January 1953): 5.
- ⁵¹ "Addresses of the 2,000 Milers (Completed as of 2/1/71)," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives; "Other Trail Traverses."
- ⁵² "Woman Walking the Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 16 (September 1955): 46.
- ⁵³ "Great-Grandma Leaves Fuller Camp Today," *Bennington Evening Banner (Vermont)*, 11 August 1955, p. 8.
- ⁵⁴ "Grandma Gatewood: A Legend Along the Appalachian Trail," *From Katahdin to Springer Mountain: The Best Stories of the Appalachian Trail* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press Inc., 1977), 16.
- ⁵⁵ "Woman Traverse Entire Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 17 (January 1956): 10-11.
- ⁵⁶ "Woman Is Hiking Appalachian Trail," *Salisbury Times (Maryland)*, 8 July 1955, p. 1.
- ⁵⁷ *Morning Herald (Uniontown, Pennsylvania)*, 18 July 1955, p. 16.
- ⁵⁸ "Hiking Grandmother Believed Well up On Long Trail Today," *North Adams Transcript (Massachusetts)*, 10 August 1955, p. 2.
- ⁵⁹ "Great-Grandma Leaves Fuller Camp Today."
- ⁶⁰ Bob Norling, "Sport City," *Portsmouth Herald (New Hampshire)*, 26 August 1955, p. 5.
- ⁶¹ "Grandmother Nearing End of Long Walk," *Evening Independent (Ohio)*, 13 September 1955, p. 10; "Hiking Grandmother Nearing Goal," *Sandusky Star News (Ohio)*, 15 September 1955, p. 24.
- ⁶² "Grandmother Hikes 12 Miles in the Rain," *Portsmouth Times (Ohio)*, 16 September 1955, p. 24.
- ⁶³ "Mrs. Emma Gatewood," *Sports Illustrated*, 15 August 1955, p. 86.
- ⁶⁴ "Hiking Grandmother Has Had All Walking She Wants for Awhile," *North Adams Transcript (Massachusetts)*, September 27 1955, p. 18; "Addresses of the 2,000 Milers (Completed as of 2/1/71)," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁶⁵ "Events and Discovers: Pioneer Grandmother," *Sports Illustrated*, 10 October 1955, pp. 12-13.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ "Woman Traverse Entire Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*.

- ⁶⁸ “Grandma Gatewood A LA Sports Illustrated,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 17 (January 1956): 11-12.
- ⁶⁹ “Hiking Grandma on Third Pair of Shoes,” *Portsmouth Times (New Hampshire)*, 5 July 1957, p. 17.
- ⁷⁰ “Mrs. Gatewood On Trail Again,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 18 (September 1957): 45.
- ⁷¹ Ibid; “Mrs. Gatewood Does it Again,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 19 (January 1957): 9.
- ⁷² “Mrs. Gatewood on Trail Again,” 45.
- ⁷³ “Long Hike Ends,” *Portsmouth Herald (New Hampshire)*, 14 September 1960, p. 2.
- ⁷⁴ “Md. Pair Seek Appalachian Trail Record,” *Berkshire Eagle (Massachusetts)*, 13 August 1963, p. 24.
- ⁷⁵ Branley Owen, “Hiking the Trail in 73 Days,” in *Hiking the Appalachian Trail*, ed. James R. Hare, (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press Inc., 1975): 1166-1175.
- ⁷⁶ Carson Brewer, “Beat Record by 10 days: Owen Completes Appalachian Trail Hike,” *The Knoxville News-Sentinel (Tennessee)*, 14 June 1970, sec. B, p. 8; Susan Owen to Lester Holmes, 24 August 1970, Folder “Branley Owen,” Box “2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972,” 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁷⁷ “Another Extended Trail Trip,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 21 (September 1960): 48.
- ⁷⁸ “Second Women Walks Entire Trail,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 19 (January 1957): 9.
- ⁷⁹ Dorothy Laker, “Trail Memories,” *Appalachian Trailway News*, 19 (May 1958): 25.
- ⁸⁰ Dorothy Laker, “My First Appalachian Trail Hike,” in *From Spring to Katahdin: The Best Stories of the Appalachian Trail*, ed. James R. Hare, (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press., 1977), 30, 24, 48, 23.
- ⁸¹ Stanley A. Murray to Owen Branley, June 30, 1970, Folder “Branley Owen,” Box “2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972,” 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁸² David Odell to ATC, April 30, 1971, Folder “David Odell,” Box “2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972,” 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.
- ⁸³ Leroy Fox to David Odell, December 27, 1970, Folder “David Odell,” Box “2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972,” 2,000 Miler Reports, ATC Archives.

Chapter Four

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- ¹² Colin Fletcher, *The Man who Walked through Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).
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- ¹⁴ Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade And the Third Great Awakening,” *The Purple Decades* (New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 265-293 quotation from 277.
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- ⁴² Edward Abby, *A Desert Solitaire* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), 37.
- ⁴³ Fletcher, *The Complete Walker*, 323.
- ⁴⁴ Susan Sands, "Backpacking: 'I Go to the Wilderness to Kick the Man-World Out of Me,'" *New York Times*, 9 May 1971, p. 1.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Harvey Manning, "Where Did All These Damn Hikers Come From?," *Backpacker*, Summer 1975, p. 38.
- ⁴⁷ Laura Waterman and Guy Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag: A History of Hiking Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1989), 563-566.
- ⁴⁸ Waterman and Waterman, *The Forest and the Crag*, 567; Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 318; for the plethora of backpacking products sold on the seventies see William Kemsley, ed., *Backpacking Equipment Buyer's Guide*, (New York: Collier Books, 1977).
- ⁴⁹ For general examples of trail guide books see Dorothy Dee, ed., *Best Hiker Trails in the United States* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1977) and Thomas A. Henley and Neesa Sweet, *Hiking in the Northeast* (Matteson, IL: Greatlakes Living Press, 1976). For a guide on nutrition and long distance hiking see June Fleming, *The Well-Fed Backpacker* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976). For a list other popular books related to backpacking see *Backpacker*, Spring 1973, p. 86.
- ⁵⁰ Dennis Hevesi, "Colin Fletcher, 85, a Trailblazer of Modern Backpacking," *New York Times*, 19 July 2007, sec. B, p. 7.
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⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Susan Sands, "Backpacking," 7.

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² Ann and Myron Sutton, *The Appalachian Trail: Wilderness on the Doorstep* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B Lippincott Company, 1966), 13.

³ Ibid., 100, 156.

⁴ "Persons Registered With The Appalachian Trail Conference As Having Walked The Whole Appalachian Trail," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1948 – 1972," 2,000 miler reports, Appalachian Trail Conservancy Archives, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (Hereafter ATC archive).

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⁸ Edward Garvey, *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* (Oakton VA: Appalachian Books, 1971), 1-21. See 13-14 for known thru-hikers before 1971.

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¹⁰ Ibid., quotation from 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 361.

¹² Lester Holmes (Executive Director of the AT), "2,000 Miler Recognition," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 31 (January 1970): 12.

¹³ *Appalachian Trailway News*, 31 (January 1970): cover.

¹⁴ Cathie Chase, "A Dream Come True," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 32 (January 1971): 11; Art Smith, "The 2,000 Mile Classroom," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 32 (September 1971): 36-37; Charles W. Dawson, "The AT In Two Parts," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 32 (September 1971): 37.

¹⁵ "1971 Thru Hikers," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 33 (January 1972): 9.

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¹⁷ "Through Hikers on the Appalachian Trail," *Appalachian Trailway News*, 32 (September 1971): 35.

¹⁸ Lester Holmes to Julia Older (and other 1973 thru-hikers), 25 October 1973, Folder "Julia Older," Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1973," 2,000 Milers Reports, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Harpers Ferry West Virginia (Hereafter ATC archives). The stock letter cited her can be found in almost every folder in the box holding 2,000 miler reports from 1973.

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²⁰ Lester Holmes to "Friend," "2,000 Miler Recommendation," c. 1974, Box "2,000 Miler Reports 1974," 2,000 Milers Reports, ATC Archive.

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- ⁴⁵ David Brill, *As Far As the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker* (Nashville, Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1990), 13, 14.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, see 55-74, for Brill's main hiking partners, see 75-88 for the company Brill had throughout his hike. According to Brill 1979 thru hikers became part of a "linear community," leaving messages for each other to find in trail registers. This explains why Brill finished his hike with so many other thru hikers. He and the group he hiked with left messages for others telling them when they expected to finish, urging them to catch up by a certain date so that they could all finish the trek together. For Brill's separation from society see 81 and 125 especially. For Brill's journal quote 113. For Brill's religious experience see 146.
- ⁴⁷ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus*, 101 (winter 1972): 27, 29.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 16, 21
- ⁴⁹ Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1998) offers a discussion on the potential for crime, particularly murder, on the AT. See pages 153-154 and 169-170.
- ⁵⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play," 26.

Chapter Six

¹ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). It is important to reiterate my focus in this thesis has been on how modern Americans have conceived wilderness. This primarily refers to decedents of European colonists and immigrants and their dominant socially constructed idea of wilderness. Once again, I surely acknowledged many other cultures, including Native Americans, have viewed the relationship between nature and human civilization quite differently.

² William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 80.

³ Ibid., 69, 79; interestingly, Cronon's argument is based on the belief that a reorientation of the wilderness idea would benefit the Environmental Movement. He fears that envisioning wilderness as apart from civilization reproduces a "dangerous dualism that sets humans outside of nature." Cronon calls on environmentalists to incorporate everything, even human constructions, into understandings of wilderness. As opposed to limiting wilderness to mountains, gorges, rivers, vast forests, and deserts etc. etc. as it

traditionally is, he thinks seeing a tree planted in a garden as equally as wild as one in a forest will create a more realistic, effective, and humane wilderness ideal.

⁴ For a good explanation of the importance of constitutive rules and institutions for games see Gordon Reddiford's "Constitutions, Institutions, and Games," *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, XII (1985): 41-51.

⁵ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

⁷ Backcountry is defined in this chapter as areas without roads, inaccessible to motor vehicles.

⁸ Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2005).

⁹ Scott Kretchmar, "The Intelligibility of Suits's Utopia: The View From Anthropological Philosophy," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sports*, XXXIII (2006): 73.

¹⁰ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 45, 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹² Searle, *Speech Acts*, 34.

¹³ R. Scott Kretchmar, "A Functionalist Analysis of Game Acts: Revisiting Searle," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, XXXVII (2001): 161.

¹⁴ Even the outright violation of constitutive rules may not necessarily ruin the functionality of a game. D'Agostino has pointed this in Fred D'Agostino, "The Ethos of Games," in *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*, ed. William J. Morgan and Klaus Meier (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988): 63-72. To compliment formal logic D'Agostino argued we must incorporate "ethos" into our understanding of games. D'Agostino showed that all games employ "an unofficial system of conventions." These implicit conventions are utilized to interpret formal rules and guide games in the direction that players and spectators want them to go. Although these conventions are not made explicit, by active participation players infer implicit standards of behavior through their own investigation. For instance, even though formally both physical contact and committing an intentional foul are against the rules of basketball, basketball players learn they can make certain amounts of contact without getting called for a foul and that they can intentionally foul at the end of a game to stop the clock without receiving a technical foul.

¹⁵ Kretchmar, *Revisiting Searle*, 170.

¹⁶ Scott Kretchmar, "Competition, Redemption, and Hope," unpublished, (17 January 2012): 8.

¹⁷ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126, 146.

²⁰ I say it is ironic because wilderness is viewed by many as a natural place not yet manipulated and thus spoiled by humans. Meanwhile scientists, inventors, doctors, etc are often viewed as the ones manipulating the natural world and disrupting the pristine nature found in wilderness. Yet, if my analysis is on target, scientific discoveries are much more a product of "natural" integrations, while wilderness experiences are imaginative, based on mythology and thus "transnatural."

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ In truth, as some have argued, if culturally (and/or individually) we took a broader view concerning what is "wild" wilderness could potentially be experienced anywhere. This is a point William Cronon makes "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." For the political end Cronon has in mind see note 3 above.

²⁵ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 40, 49

²⁶ McKibben's argument, which I take in this instance to have validity, is based on evidence that human produced carbon emissions have irrevocably caused the earth to warm in a way it would not have otherwise. With temperatures rising throughout the entire globe, there is nowhere left where nature exists independent of human influences.

Conclusion

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