

PATH WAYS

Of the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers

PATH Year 60, No. 1

March 2024

The Trail's Wide Enough for the Both of Us

Some thoughts on Maintainers and Thru-hikers

By Robert Rubin (from PATHWAYS, 1998)

Thru-hikers get all the attention. And why not? Walking two thousand miles is a big deal. But now that thousands of people try to do it each year, maybe a little of the novelty has worn off. We see a lot of thru-hikers come through our sixty-odd miles of trail each year, and it's only natural, as maintainers, to feel a little under-appreciated.

After all, we do a lot of work on this trail, and then the thru-hikers go cruising by: not a care in the world, grumbling about shelters and treadways, often oblivious to the work we've done clearing and relocating the trail, aloof from older, slower, recreational hikers (the kind of hikers so many of us are when we're not hefting pulaskis), sponging off everybody they get near, shrugging off or skipping entirely the little side-trips and scenic vistas that we've worked so hard on. Who wouldn't feel a little miffed?

Last year I had the opportunity to try on the other boot, though. Starting April Fool's Day in Georgia, I quit my job, put my life on hold for six months, and started walking to Maine. By the last week in May I was camped out on the porch of the Mt. Rogers Visitors Center, eating pizza with half a dozen other stinking, scruffy-looking vagrants and happily informing the guy next to me that we were crossing the part of the AT that *my* club maintained.

"Cool," he said. "Hey, you gonna eat that last slice of pepperoni?"

Since then I've come to understand things a little better. Maybe you'd never get a thru-hiker to admit it, but, as maintainers, *we are the enemy*. Look at it from their perspective: Who sent the trail up that devious ridgecrest that doesn't show on the profile map? We did. Who



maliciously routed the treadway through a field of fresh cow patties and tall, wet grass that soaks a thru-hiker's boots? We did. Whose cunning deception erected a sign that promised a trail shelter in three miles, when it's actually four-and-a-half? Ours.

Thru-hikers (and I'm generalizing here, for of course there are exceptions) are not like day hikers, or weekend backpackers, or even section hikers completing the whole AT piece by piece. Sure, they love the woods, the views, the glories of nature. It's what brought them to the AT in the first place. But they're usually too busy thru-hiking to spend much time smelling the evening primroses. If you're going to get to Maine in six months, you have to hustle. You are at war with anything that slows you down, that gets in your way, that holds you back. The trail itself becomes a sort of beloved adversary, ready to trip you up one minute and surprise you with its wonders the next.

Thru-hiking is not about any one section of the trail, any single overlook, any carefully-constructed switchback. It's about drifting like smoke through the landscape, about giving yourself over entirely to the journey, about the entirety of the experience, not the particulars.

As maintainers, on the other hand, it is the particulars that occupy us. This stile. That bridge. Those switchbacks. That relo. What we don't see on our monthly maintenance trips, but the thru-hiker does, is that the farmlands and bottom lands near Groseclose, Poor Valley, and Rich Valley make for a lovely contrast with all the highland ridges between Mt. Rogers and Springer Mountain. Our section, at times, reminded me of the English countryside after a month up around 4,000 or 5,000 feet. Ours are the first stiles, beaver dams, bog bridges, and cow pastures that they've had to hike through. When they're crossing from Mount Rogers to Chestnut Knob, they're crossing the Great Valley of Virginia that settlers followed enroute to the Cumberland Gap.

We can be proud of our section of trail, of our part in this magnificent enterprise called the AT. And when the thru-hiker has reached Maine, or Georgia, or some destination in between, when he or she has stopped being a thru-hiker and started sleeping under a roof and four walls again, then, perhaps, he or she will revisit in memory some small wonder that we had a part in revealing. We can be proud of that, too.

I should say that I heard a number of the thru-hikers praise both the trails and the shelters -- particularly Chestnut Knob. It isn't an easy section, but for the most part it's well graded and well maintained. There's a lot of variety: towns, lowlands, open ridges, and the Mount Rogers Headquarters area.

One of the things that makes the AT so important, I think, is that it doesn't take sides. It's there for all of us, and all of us bring a little something different to it. The trail maintainer out for an afternoon of camaraderie and fresh air in the service of a grand enterprise, the day hiker with a rucksack slung over the shoulder out to climb a hill and enjoy the view, the picnicker with a toddler in one hand and a cooler in the other, the weekender out to test himself by bagging a peak or two, the section hiker out to escape work for two weeks, and the thru-hiker out for a summer of adventure, a summer listening to the voice inside that only begins to speak clearly after five months away from TV commercials and car horns.

There's room there for all of us, even though it's only a single track.

Robert Rubin was a PATH member who thru-hiked the trail in 1997. His hike became the subject of a well-received book, "On the Beaten Path," in the year 2000. See Page 7. He also wrote the "Ballad of the Rhymin' Worm," too long to reproduce here, but soon, hopefully, to be found on the new PATH website. This story is reproduced from the newsletter in 1998. Robert lives today in Fuquay Varina, N.C.

A Bridge Year for PATH?

Here is some work done jacking up the bridge over the Middle Fork of the Holston River in October last year. At right, applying the jack. Below, the finished product. Note new cribbing.



We have a lot of work to do this year – and maybe next, too

It could be said that this is going to be a bridge year for the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers, but not in the way that you're probably thinking. It's because we have a LOT of bridges to deal with, some in worse condition than others. Whether we get them all repaired and in premium condition, well, we'll see.

The bridge year actually started during last summer's Summerfest when 28 PATH workers replaced the failing bridge over Phillippi Branch, near the Settlers' Museum of Southwest Virginia, with a new and solid ford. Then in October 2023, an ingenious group of workers jacked up the threatened north end of the footbridge over the Middle Fork of the Holston River, just south of the Norfolk Southern railroad. That's where the Middle Fork was beginning to eat into the bank and raising questions about the bridge's future.

Led by Konnarock and High Country crew leader Jerry Kyle, they replaced the failing cribbing with heavy engineered stuff that's likely to last a long time, gently lowered the bridge – using two jacks, actually – and let it settle onto its new base. At right above, you can see Jerry working with one of the jacks. At left, Ron Hudnell surveys the finished product. Bridge No. 1, done! For the record, this short summary makes it sound easier than it was.

Bridge No. 2 is the one over Hunting Camp Creek near the Jenkins Shelter and the north end of PATH's mileage. The stringers will remain, but much of the rest of the bridge needs

replacing, and some parts were cut in advance late in the fall. Tentative plans have been to work on this in March, but we probably won't finish.

Bridge No. 3 is the bridge over Lynn Camp Creek north of Va. 42 and the Knot Maul Shelter. A couple of years ago, there was talk about taking this out completely, but it now seems repair may be possible if we can just get materials there. An old woods road approaches the place, but it has an awful lot of trees down on it, and it looks like the place is a wilderness study area. Stay tuned!



Bridge No. 4, of course, is the one planned over Lick Creek, replacing a bridge washed out several years ago. This has been farmed out to the Federal Highway Administration. (Yes, we scratched our heads, too, but that's what the Forest Service did. This bridge will likely need a support pillar in the middle.) Only survey work has taken place so far, at least that we're aware of. Here's a picture of the current bridge site, taken by 2022-23 thru-hiker Greg Ward, a.k.a. "Pilgrim." Fortunately, it's usually a pretty shallow ford.

Milestones

■ We regret to report the passing of longtime PATH member **Maxine Highfill Blackwood**, 98, on Sunday, Dec. 10, in Greensboro. Maxine was the sister of PATH founder Hollyce Highfill Kirkland. Services took place Dec. 18 at Guilford Memorial Park in Greensboro.

Donations may be made to Friends Homes at Guilford, 925 New Garden Road, Greensboro, N.C. 27410, or to Muir's Chapel United Methodist Church, 314 Muir's Chapel Road, Greensboro, N.C. 27410. Maxine was a lifetime member of the church, and it is where PATH once held annual meetings.

Bits and Pieces

■ **THE IDES OF MARCH:** 2024 looks like it will be another active year for hikers and thus for maintainers, **Ron Hudnell** reported on New Year's Eve. As of then, 2,727 hikers had already registered with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to do thru-hikes or flip-flops for the three-month period February 1 thru April 30. Several days are at or above 50 hikers per day! We start work on the Ides of March, March 15, and of course, a fraction of those thousands will make it to Virginia. But anyway, get ready!

■ **TRAIL WORK KEEPS YOU YOUNG:** Yes, it does. Proof of that was the 104th birthday celebration for PATH member **Hollyce Kirkland** in November in Sevierville, Tenn. Her husband **Marvin Kirkland** organized it, and several current PATH workers who attended included **Joe Levsen, Marcia Cope, Chris and Rhonda Bracknell** and **Martha Emrey**. Also **Bill Chatfield**. She obviously doesn't do trail work any longer, but she is one of the originals from our 1965 founding who's still around. She was also a longtime advisor to the Appalachian Trail Conference and the magazine *Appalachian Trailway News*, forerunner to *AT Journeys*.



■ **A PATH FINANCIAL NOTE:** When donating money, especially to PATH, don't forget that some employers will match your donation or donate on their own. PATH recently received a \$150 donation from Wells Fargo's Blackbaud Giving Fund as part of PATH member and Wells Fargo employee **Paul Haag's** volunteer work. The donation was made on behalf of the bank's Community Care Grants Program and its donors. Thanks to all, especially Paul.

■ **A BORING REPORT:** As of early February, boring for the **Mountain Valley Pipeline** was about halfway completed under the Appalachian Trail in Giles County, Va., north of the PATH section, and there were a lot of lights and people in the area. So be careful if your travels take you near there. The AT is about 300 feet uphill from the bore pit on both the Virginia and West Virginia sides of the bore pits. MVP is reportedly helicoptering in 40 to 50 workers per day, and the area is crawling with law enforcement and security. There still have been some protests in the area. Thanks to **Diana Christopulos** of the **Roanoke AT Club** for this report.

■ **PATH T-SHIRTS:** Remember that you can order both the popular yellow PATH t-shirt and the new Poop Pushers t-shirt, strictly for people doing privy work, at the Web address below. Thanks to those making these t-shirts available.

<https://mommascustomtees-llc.square.site/product/PATHVolunteer/262>

■ **A CHURCH'S TRAIL MINISTRY:** PATH members we don't all know may still be doing great things for the trail. Here is a Methodist Church newsletter article about what Rev. **Alan Ashworth** and a small church in Bastian, Va., are doing for the trail. Thanks to **Ron Hudnell** for finding this story and passing it on. Print copy later on, hopefully.

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/small-churches-big-ministry>

2024 Calendar

March 8-10, 2024

Southern Partnership Mtg.

Marion, Va.

This is a meeting of trail club and agency partners to scope out the year ahead. This year's meeting will take place at Hungry Mother State Park off Va. 16 north of Marion. For info, contact Kathryn Herndon at kherndon@appalachiantrail.org or by phone at (540) 904-4316.

March 15-17, 2024

March Work Weekend

Sugar Grove, Va.

Trail survey and maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. We'll be looking for wintertime damage to our trail sections and putting together a work schedule for spring. We may also work on reconstructing the Hunting Camp Creek bridge near Jenkins Shelter. This is Ron Hudnell's model of what it will look like.



April 19-21, 2024

April Work Weekend

Sugar Grove, Va.

Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. We'll likely continue bridge work scheduled to be started in March.

May 10-12, 2024

Mount Rogers Naturalist Rally

Konnarock, Va.

The annual Spring Naturalist Rally operates out of the Blue Ridge Discovery Center and features workshops, lectures, field trips and a hike to the top of Mount Rogers, Virginia's highest mountain. Info is available at www.blueridgediscoverycenter.org. Or call (276) 388-3155.

May 17-19, 2024

May Work Weekend

Stony Fork, Va.

Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. This is the first work weekend of the year at Stony Fork Campground, off U.S. 52 north of Wytheville.

May 20-24, 28-31

Wilderness Skills Institute

Brevard, N.C.

The 2024 Wilderness Skills Institute courses will be taught in two one-week sessions at the Cradle of Forestry. Includes crosscut saw, wilderness first aid and CPR, horse packing, trail layout, stonework, others. Apply by March 15 at www.wildernessskillsinstitute.org/sawsi.

June 12-15, 2024

June Summerfest Week

Atkins, Va.?

Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. This will probably be Summerfest and probably at the Settlers' Museum near Atkins. No details yet.

July 19-21, 2024

July Work Weekend

Stony Fork, Va.

Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night.

August 16-18, 2024	August Work Weekend	Sugar Grove, Va.
Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night.		
Sept. 20-21, 2024	September Work Weekend	Sugar Grove, Va.
Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night.		
October 18-19, 2024	October Work Weekend	Sugar Grove, Va.
Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night.		
November 16, 2024	PATH Annual Meeting	TBA
We'll announce the location closer to the time of the meeting.		

A Review of a PATH Writer's Book

ON THE BEATEN PATH: AN APPALACHIAN PILGRIMAGE, by Robert Alden Rubin. The Lyons Press. 233 pages. 2000.

Reviewed by Karl Kunkel

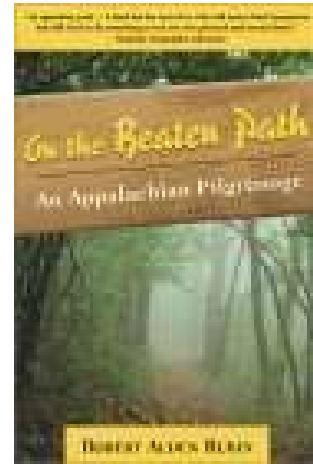
Except for a change in the creative trail names of fellow thru-hikers and some other updates, Robert “Rhymin’ Worm” Rubin’s fascinating account of his 1997 northbound thru-hike is still as timely today and should sit prominently on any Appalachian Trail lover’s bookshelf.

This book isn’t just another “life on the AT” story. This one has a personal connection for many of PATH’s older members and a connection to PATH history for newer members. The author had been an active member with PATH in the late 1990s as a trail maintainer and for a period as the club newsletter editor. In 1997, he made the commitment to thru-hike from Georgia to Maine. Why? As he described his personal circumstances upfront, his career as a book editor was grinding him down and affecting his personal life. Perhaps a thru-hike — or a pilgrimage, as worded in the title — would unveil some personal answers.

His supportive wife Cathy stuck with him throughout his trek, meeting him at various points along the way. As Rubin chronicles this pilgrimage, he seamlessly weaves various threads together, creating a tight, colorful tapestry of personal challenges, equipment issues, the AT’s evolution, eccentric fellow hikers, quirky weather surprises, flora variations, terrain changes, and the risk of hike-ending accidents.

His descriptions of slogging through the famous long, green tunnel and its ridges and valleys are relatable to anyone who has spent some time on the Trail, even as dayhikers. His account of the simple act of tripping and falling while carrying a pack was spot-on, as we have all fallen: “Everything happens in slow motion when you fall.”

The beginning of each chapter gives the reader a clear indicator of where the pilgrimage is at any given time: the calendar day, the location, total miles hiked, how many remaining, current weather, and elevation.



Continued on next page

PATH members will recognize some familiar landmarks, such as Knot Maul Shelter, as he hiked the exact same sections he had worked on as a trail volunteer the previous year. And, in the Acknowledgements, he thanks former PATH president Parthena Martin and former member Clint Kawanishi for their help.

Rubin's book is probably one of the more literary-focused hiking-odyssey books out there; no surprise, as he has advanced degrees in English and creative writing. He frequently references poet Walt Whitman and nature writer Henry David Thoreau, with quotes from T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Chaucer, and others sprinkled throughout.

Rubin's tenure with PATH had been a rare opportunity for many of us to witness — in some small way — part of his quest, before and after — and then reading the results. Newer PATH members will have the opportunity to relive his adventure, in book form, realizing he and countless others had trekked over the very same trails we regularly maintain.

His accomplishment is an excellent reminder that our club is composed of a variety of characters, who, like himself, have important reasons for getting out on the trail, for our own personal pilgrimages, in whatever form.

As we have space over the next few months, Pathways is going to look at PATH authors, of which there have been several through the years. This is a review of Robert Rubin's memoir, "On the Beaten Path," from 2000. Robert also wrote the article on our front page, which is from the archives.

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This is a newsletter for the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers, a trail work club that maintains some 70 miles of the Appalachian Trail in Southwest Virginia. This newsletter comes out four or five times a year, as long as we have enough material and contributions. It is sent by email to the PATH List and others, or by U.S. Mail to members who don't have email or prefer print. It's OK to print and post in your local outdoor store. MAY DEADLINE April 20, 2024. Web site: www.path-at.org. Or for info: PiedmontATHikers@gmail.com. Or see our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/PiedmontATHikers/

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Want to Join?



We are working on the Trail in 2024. If you'd like to join us, here's how: You may join PATH (or renew) at our Web site, www.path-at.org, with PayPal, or print and mail this form with check or money order. You can also attend work weekends/meetings and join or renew there. Please don't mail cash!

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Annual membership dues are \$20 for an individual _____, \$25 for a family _____ or \$15 for a student_____. Donations are also accepted. Donation total _____

Send payment to PATH Treasurer, P.O. Box 4423, Greensboro, North Carolina 27404. Total amount enclosed _____

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