

# **Notes From Steve (The Hammer) Weisel's Appalachian Trail Adventure, April & May 2001**

## **General Comments**

Having completed my first Appalachian Trail (AT) hiking and backpacking adventure, I have recorded some of my thoughts and the daily notes of my time on the trail. This is the product. Some readers will find it's too much detail and it puts them to sleep. If so, you are not my target audience. I really have written this more for my own recollection and myself than anything, but there are some parts family and friends will probably enjoy. If you are thinking about going out there, you will probably find worthwhile tidbits throughout this document and I refer you to my training document and equipment list as well.

My adventure lasted about six weeks – three of training and three on the trail. This account is focused on the latter. The idea was for me to join, at Damascus, VA, George Domas, a USMA' 64 classmate with whom I roomed at West Point during Beast Barracks in 1960. George had decided to thru-hike the entire AT (2,160 miles) and would be coming from the south into Virginia. Another classmate, Jack Price lives in Abingdon, VA. Abingdon is about ten miles from Damascus. When George arrived at Damascus, Jack picked him up to get him fed, washed, and rested, and I joined them at Jack's home. Without equivocation I must say I went because I had the opportunity to join George. George is a giant in terms of will power, focus, and determination. It was not for his good looks that he was the honor graduate of his Ranger training class. I owe a great debt both to him and to Jack and his wife Sam who showed George and I hospitality and enthusiastic support that went well beyond what anyone might anticipate.

The first thing I want emphasize is that this was a tremendously rewarding experience which I will remember keenly (and probably talk about) for the rest of my life. It was "fun" at times, but more often it was mentally and physically challenging. For thru-hikers, Virginia is sometimes thought of as a relatively easy part of the trail. For better or worse, the part that I did is south of where the "easy" part begins, and there were only a few days when we had good hiking weather. I would say that my three weeks and 254 miles on the AT composed one of the most difficult things I have done since I went through the Army's Ranger Training in 1964. I might note that a week after I left the AT, I got a note from George in Waynesboro, VA. George told me that the section from where I left the trail, Troutville, VA, to Waynesboro was much less difficult and that he had much better hiking weather conditions. George covered that stretch of about 130 miles in seven or eight days. Further, the next stretch of 100 miles through the Shennandoah National Park is supposed to be even more pleasant. Plus, because the AT crosses back and forth across the road in the park where there are places to get food and refreshment, hikers have to carry less food and worry less about dehydration. As I type this, I am already thinking of going back out, maybe a week at a time, to complete hiking the more than 500 miles of the AT in Virginia. As a matter of note, about 25% of the entire AT is in this state.

In AT parlance, I was a sector hiker. I have defined that a little further on. Most of the people with whom I had contact on the trail were thru-hikers. Given the size of my sector (miles) and length (days) of my effort, I was on the AT long enough to get a good feel for what was involved (in SW VA at least), and I was pretty well emersed and accepted into the world and culture of the thru-hikers. Because I joined a thru-hiker, I felt it was pretty much my obligation to go at his rate and with his schedule. I have to say, though, that George and I were a great match, both in terms of hiking ability and in our personal interactions, so staying on his schedule was not an issue at all. In fact, we jointly planned our efforts for several days at a time and were collegial in making the day-to-day decisions as well.

In the sector I did with George there was no such thing as an “easy” day. Some days were simply less hard than others. Once in training and once on the trail I had the mindset that I was starting an “easy” day. This was a big mistake, and, both times, I regretted having had that mental set. The vast bulk of the hiking was either up big hills or mountains or down the other side. The latter was often more difficult and more apt to provide injury. My leg muscles were often screaming at me, and as we pressed forward on long, steep, uphill slopes. Making the next step was often a matter of great willpower. The footing of the trails (trail condition) was often downright nasty. When I thought of trail in conjunction with the AT, I thought of paths that were relatively easy to walk on. Even though this was sometimes the case, often we were hiking on nasty, sharp, and/or large rocks. Sometimes the rocks were so big you were more in a climbing mode than a hiking mode, and sometimes you were negotiating dangerous slopes and drop-offs. Despite real efforts to avoid it, during hot weather – and we had a lot of unseasonably hot days, dehydration was a frequent effect of sweat streaming out of me. These things were the price for joining a special culture and group of people and I was glad to have paid it.

Southwest to central Virginia is an absolutely beautiful area. Most people don’t realize how beautiful. nor do many of us who live in the north of the state really sense how far away places such as Abingdon and Damascus are – two hours of driving south of Virginia Tech. We went through places like Damascus, which holds a “Trail Days” celebration each May, and many other smaller spots where we came in contact with people. This occurred at country stores, restaurants, motels, and in a myriad of other ways. I was continuously and strongly impressed with the warmth and friendliness that appeared almost universal. Likewise, I was surprised by how much understanding seemed to be present about what we (hikers) were doing and the challenges it imposed. We always appeared pretty rag-tag and often reeked with odor, but this didn’t seem to put people off. They knew who we were.

At the end, I had drunk from the cup (AT hiking) and was sated -- at least temporarily. I might go out on the AT again, and certainly intend to hike and backpack some more. However, I have no desire to leave the modern world for months at a time to be a thru-hiker. They have some sort of node in their brain that makes them a little different than most of us. Each has his/her own driving forces and those thru-hikers that are successful have truly done something noteworthy. Never the less, as I have had the chance to do a few times earlier in life as a result of my Army experiences, I have returned from the AT with a refreshed knowledge of the beauty and force of nature and a renewed appreciation of the basics of life. E.g. a drink of cool, clean, water; something warm to eat on a cold day; shelter from the elements; dry clothes; a toilet; the ability to wash; etc. Of course included in this is the camaraderie of other good people sharing similar challenges and experience. This output is well worth the input.

Two sections follow: Topical notes and then a day by day description of our activity

## **Topical Notes**

### **Who’s Out There (Thru hikers, sector hikers, day/weekend hikers)?**

Thru-hikers are people who intend to do the complete Appalachian Trail between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Kathadin in Maine during one, more or less, continuous period. They may not do it end to end, but may do a “flip-flop.” E.g. Hike from Georgia north to Massachusetts, and then go to Maine and hike south to the break off point in Massachusetts. They may leave the trail for injury, sickness, personal affairs, etc for short periods of time, but these absences are generally thought of as temporary breaks.

Only a small percentage of people who set out to be thru-hikers are successful. They hike sectors and then leave. Some people have been known to leave because they felt the approach to the trail at Springer

Mountain was too arduous. People leave for many reasons, e.g. physical demands, funding, boredom, home front requirements, etc.

Most of the thru-hikers are twenty-somethings just out of college or the military or at some other breakpoint in their lives – most often they are people who have not yet made life commitments. Then there is a much smaller bunch of tough old guys in their late 50's or early 60's who are past meeting those big time activities such as raising families, etc. In our case, in addition to George and me (although I wasn't a thru-hiker), there were two 65 year olds whom we saw a lot of. These were both tough, gritty men originally from the mountains of West Virginia. One, "Footsteps" had hiked the 464 miles from Springer Mountain in GA to Damascus, VA during a previous year. He got back on the trail this year at Damascus and was bound for Maine. Technically, he might not be a thru-hiker. However, he, and anyone else who hikes the entire AT in such big chunks comes close enough in my book. These gentlemen got up early, went slow and hiked late into the day, but they stayed on course. Naturally, there were some exceptions to these two groupings, but they were just that – exceptions.

Sector hikers are those who take a limited period of time to do a specific segment of the AT. Sometimes, over a period of time – generally several years, sector hikers will try and do the entire AT via this method. The people who set out to be sector hikers vary more across the age spectrum. Of course, as I noted, many who start out as thru-hikers evolve into becoming sector hikers. In fact I encountered very few other sector hikers. I guess they come out later in the season and perhaps are more apt to do easier to reach sectors.

Weekend and day hikers are often present on portions of the trail. They are in greater numbers on weekends and in the very late spring through the summer. Although most respect the trails and the other hikers, there are some that don't know or follow trail etiquette, and are viewed with disdain by other hikers. These small segments of day hikers are the people most likely to leave trash and abuse places like shelters. However, most of the weekend and day hikers are good users of the trails and are often very supportive of those hiking longer distances.

Dogs are also present. All the AT guide books discourage bringing them on the trail, but some do it anyway. Day hikers are most prone to bring dogs. Generally, dogs are not at all welcomed by the other hikers.

Having said the above, typically, on any given day on the AT during my 20 days there, we would probably encounter other hikers an average of 2-4 times while hiking. This low number was likely due to when and where we were hiking. I feel sure that in other areas and at other times the frequency of contact would go up.

### **The Trail**

Headquarters for the AT is the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) located in Harper's Ferry, WV. The trail is maintained by a series of individual clubs who are coordinated via the ATC. For example, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club maintains the northern Virginia sector. These clubs have a lot of people who come out and do heavy duty work as volunteers. They may also pay some people to help with the effort. I know the Potomac AT Club maintains many other trails because I hiked on some of them while training. George and I met a few of the volunteers a couple times during the early portion of our hiking together.

The trails are generally well marked by white blazes about every 50 yards or so – with some flexibility. Most often the blazes are easy to find and follow and are on trees about six or seven feet off the ground. However, sometimes they are on fences, on posts in the ground in the middle or end of a field, or on rocks that may be readily visible in all conditions or rocks on the ground. The latter make finding your way in

the snow somewhat dicey. Fortunately, when it snowed we were not in an area where blazes were on rocks on the ground when we were in snow.

Map sets for the entire trail or even single maps can be obtained through the ATC. They maps are prepared by the clubs who maintain the AT, but these club-prepared maps may have some overlap. When getting ready to go out, I tried to buy the maps I wanted at local outfitters. This included five maps and I couldn't find one of the five – albeit I tried four different places. Finally I called the ATC and they sent it to me promptly and at a lower price than that for which the stores were selling them. Bottom line is, for maps, just call the ATC (304-535-6331). Note that the maps we had showed a very narrow strip of terrain and it was difficult to keep the area you were in perspective with the bigger picture. I carried a small piece of a state roadmap that I found helped me keep the perspective I wanted.

There is a lot of info on the web and there are a lot of books related to the AT. Unfortunately, I tried two library branches in my area and came up pretty dry. The ATC has some, but the outfitters (e.g. REI, Hudson Trail Outfitters, and others) will normally have books to choose from. I bought, and copied for carrying, appropriate pages from The Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers Guide. Anyone thinking of going out should spend some time perusing the published offerings and picking up one or two.

### **Trail Names**

Almost everyone uses a trail name. They are distinctive and tend to be unique. A good trail name is also memorable and should have meaning. As I mentioned in an earlier note, my hiking friends thought my initial choice, “Burke” (since I live in Burke, VA) was wimpy. We spent some brain cells and time while they prodded me until I came up with “The Hammer” which people seemed to think was a great name.

### **Training effectiveness**

Thru-hikers generally try to get in some sort of condition before they get out on the trail, but mostly work their way into being trail-hardened by hiking slowly and short distances at first, and building up. If you are going to join a thru-hiker who has been out more than a few weeks, you need to work hard to get ready. This means hiking in all conditions on the nastiest terrain you can find and with a full backpack. Everyone who goes out there should practice using his or her equipment before going out. The idea is to be totally comfortable with it. Although you will make some changes and adjustments based on specific trail experience and day to day conditions, you should know exactly what you are carrying, where it is, and how to get to it. You need to make sure, for example, that your pack cover is where you can get it quickly should it start raining. In a separate document I described how I trained, and it seemed to work. I was, surprising to some, able to keep up from the start.

### **Food**

Most people carry too much. I did, initially. The rule of thumb is generally two pounds per day with as many calories, carbohydrates and protein as you can get. However, figuring out how many days' worth to carry is not all that simple. There are more opportunities to buy things or to eat along the way than I had thought there would be. Certainly you won't encounter these every day or even every other day, and often you will not be able to get what you would like. Its also usually a little more expensive to buy things in the country stores and small towns than you might find at home. Never-the-less, a careful map/guidebook study can make the opportunities more apparent, and these opportunities should be fully taken advantage off. The goal is to not only eat well, but do so without carrying food (weight) you do not need to carry.

In the cold weather its nice to be able to make something hot in the a.m. and have something hot at night. Items like instant oatmeal seem most popular for the mornings, and the Lipton Noodle type packages and/or Ramen Noodles seem most popular for the evenings. Some of the freeze dried meals for camping are great, but they are expensive and somewhat bulky – although not very heavy. When looking at the

Lipton Noodles, get those that don't require more than ten minutes of cooking. Each variety has different cooking lengths. If you boil water and put the noodles in with a closed lid on the pot, you don't really have to cook for the specified length – just wait that amount of time. With Ramen noodles, there are carbohydrates, but not much else of food value so make sure you eat some peanut butter or something. Some people don't like to carry cans because you have to haul out or burn the trash and cans won't burn. However, several times I added a small can of chicken to a Lipton's package or a Ramen Noodle and it was great.

Aside from the stuff you cook, lots of trail mix/gorp (certainly make your own), power bars, dried fruit, jerky, snickers bars, etc seem to be in everyone's pack. I made up, and stored in separate plastic bags, food for a day at a time. In addition, small jars of peanut butter are also very popular with people eating a quick spoonful or two with whatever else they are eating.

### **On My Body**

I was a walking survival kit. I had the following on me at all times when I was hiking. Certainly not everyone had the equivalent. First I wore long pants the entire time. They had several pockets that made it easy to carry stuff. I had a nylon (cheap from the PX or Army Navy store) wallet, which I kept, in a waterproof bag. In it I had one of the popular credit cards, a phone card, my drivers license and military ID, a list of important phone numbers and cash. The wallet had a Velcro change section. I avoided carrying change most of the time, but did carry a house key. Carrying everything in your pack is risky. As backup to losing my wallet, I kept another credit card and some additional cash buried at the bottom of my first aid kit.

I carried an emergency survival blanket, a cigarette lighter, matches, toilet paper, iodine tablets, a very small flashlight (CMG Infinity) and a small pocket knife (Swiss Army Classic). The CMG Infinity was pretty expensive (about \$17) but was one of my better purchases. It was light, used only one AA battery, rugged, waterproof, and turned on by rotating a bevel so it would be very difficult to turn on accidentally. I kept it on a lanyard. Throughout the day the lanyard was looped through a belt loop on my trousers. At night I kept the CMG Infinity around my neck. I was satisfied with it enough so that I never used and sent home the headlamp I initially carried as well. The latter are very popular, but I didn't need it or its added weight. I also kept my pocket knife in a different pocket and on a lanyard hung through a belt loop. The same lanyard (a piece of nylon line) had a P-38 C-Ration can opener on it.

I wore long pants to avoid getting scratched up by the bushes and to minimize insect bites. During cold weather I had the pants tucked into my boots. I should have done that in warm weather as well. Instead I rolled them a little bit and the bugs feasted on my lower legs as well as my arms. Even with the long pants and even though I was the only one I saw use any insect repellent, I believe I had, by far the most bug bites around. You know if bugs find you appetizing before you go, so do what's right for you.

**Trekking Poles:** Most of the hikers have them. They look like ski poles but are different. If you have middle-aged or older knees, a la George and me, after the water bottles, there was probably nothing more valuable that we carried than our poles. They come in a number of variations. I got mine at REI on sale for about \$50. Most people paid considerably more – up to \$160 (too much). But if you are going to do serious hiking – especially on hills, I cannot over emphasize how much these things will help.

### **Weapons**

I had various people, mostly those uncomfortable with the out-of-doors, encourage me to carry a gun or a weapon-sized knife. To my knowledge, none of the hikers I encountered had guns. If they did, they were well hidden and not quickly available anyway. Besides, they weigh too much, and, in various places along the trail, I know they are illegal. Some of the guide books have specifics on this. At one point I considered carrying a medium sized Buck Knife since I had it, but deferred to the Swiss Army Classic

which is quite small but has a knife blade, a scissors, and a screw driver. I remember a conversation with my ex-wife Karin who was encouraging me to bring a knife. I showed her the Swiss Army Classic, and she said, "Not that, a real knife." I then showed her the Buck Knife and asked if this was what she had in mind. She responded, "No, not that kind. I mean a REAL knife!" I think the Crocodile Dundee movie had too big an impact. I wasn't going to get in any knife fights, nor did I intend to wrestle any bears to the finish -- I thought the "play dead" technique had a better chance of success.

### **Weather – and Dressing for It**

In the span of a week it went from tee shirt weather to 20 degrees with snow and back to 80+ degrees. To say that you need to be prepared for variety in the mountains of Virginia during April is an understatement. It really doesn't take much to keep warm on even very cold days when you are hiking, but be prepared to work with layers and to have dry things to switch out of or add-on when you stop. If you aren't too cold in the process of doing so, a good way of getting clothes dry at the end of the day is wearing them under something that keeps your body heat in. Definitely try and get them into your sleeping bag with you. Everyone needs to wear either a hat or a bandana on their head. Primarily to keep from getting scratched, fending off the sun, and/or providing warmth. I think a hat with some type of visor or brim works best. I did the bandana thing for a couple days when I left my hat someplace (later retrieved it). I felt very rakish – and looked like a pirate, but preferred a hat.

### **Boots**

I wore a pair of old Army boots. They worked o.k. for me but were going downhill fast after I had put 375 miles on them. I really can't say how much real wear and tear they had previously acquired. However, unless you are going to be one of those supper light hikers sans tent, etc, everyone needs sturdy and supportive hiking boots. Besides the miles, there are too many rocks all over and sections of very rocky trail encountered to do otherwise. Boots need care, and any leather on them should be repeatedly water sealed with some type of wax such as Sno-Seal. The latter comes in jars but you can scoop some out into a small plastic sandwich bag to add to your pack.

### **Water**

There are pumps with filter, tablets, purifiers, and small bottles that have crystals. I didn't like using tablets and my pump with filter didn't work well. If going again, I would take a fresh look at what was available. Of course, if it were only for 2-3 days, the tablets would probably be o.k. The other items do cost \$50-100. A point to be made and, undoubtedly heard many times before by many readers: You need to drink as much water as you can get. Heck sitting in an office, the health folks say you should drink eight glass of water (or something) a day. When you are out there slugging up and down hills, you need lots more. Try to plan where you will get topped off along the way, and if need be, carry as much water as you can. I didn't take them, but you might consider taking some electrolyte tablets if you are going to be out there sweating big time for more than a day or two. Might also consider some powdered Gaterade to add to some of your water. Check to ensure it adds real value.

Some people carry hydration systems composed of bags of water in their packs which have drinking hoses hooked onto the backpack harness. The idea is to allow a hiker to drink as he/she goes along or quickly at a stop. The main plus I saw with these was the bags held more than two liters of water. My hiking partner George had one, but almost always had to stop to drink. It took me only a moment when stopped to grab one of my two water bottles. Eventually both of us added capacity by carrying a 20 ounce Gaterade bottle for water as well.

### **Motels/Stores/Civilization**

Some sector hikers out for a week or less will avoid these places, but most thru-hikers and most sector hikers try to take advantage of such establishments every chance they get. Sometimes there is risk in the decision making process because there may be a store or town a few miles off of the trail. In our one

hitch-hiking effort, George and I had quick success. Others have had bad luck and have had to walk extra miles. Hikers do like to get washed up, wash their clothes, and get some decent or even half-decent food. The AT is long enough and tough enough that no one looks down on doing that sort of thing as often as circumstances permit. The idea is to hike the trail and not be miserable or a survivalist. Likewise, almost everyone hiking significant distances seems to take an occasional rest day. These are important and help prepare hikers for some of the grueling days they will encounter.

When people do take breaks in towns of any substance they can usually find a library. The libraries usually have computers you can use to access the Internet. I used my Yahoo email account (It's a freebie) to check my email (I had it all forwarded to that account) and to send some email when in Pearisburg. George, my hiking partner, has done this successfully several times during his journey to date

### **Trail Angels**

These are people who, without compensation, go out of their way to assist hikers. We encountered a number of them as well as people who, while getting paid, went far beyond what they might be expected to do. In the south and central part of Virginia, base on my experience, people like and welcome hikers. I would also say, many of the people who live there have hiking as one of their recreational/sport activities.

### **First Aid Kits**

If bugs like you – they love me – be ready. Everyone knows they should have a first aid kit. However, I made some additions to what you can get off the shelf that proved valuable. Specifically this included: Cortizone Cream to help reduce itching from bug bites or itch producing plants; Ibuprofen which I only used if it was really needed, but sometimes it was; Tincture of Benzoin (Toughskin) to help avoid rubs and blisters; Moleskin – works better than band aids and tape in protecting areas of your feet that are getting roughed up; and a small snake bite kit that probably was not really needed, but it made me more comfortable. Every day, usually before getting into my sleeping bag in the evening I “doctored” my feet. Paying early attention to rubs and irritations is essential to being able to stay out there.

## **Day By Day Notes**

At its essence the daily activity for each day were the same. That was, decide where we intend to go – recognizing this might change due to circumstances, prepare ourselves for the effort, pack our gear, and then do it. Circumstances such as terrain, weather, and what kind of shape we were in from previous efforts all played a factor. However, I made notes each day that reflect items that I thought merited recalling for my own reminiscences and which some others may find portions of interesting and even a bit instructive if they get the itch to get out there:

### **12 April:**

Received a call from Jack Price in Abingdon, VA that George Domas, my hiking partner to be, had arrived in Damascus and was being picked up. Damascus was on the AT and about ten miles from Abingdon. I indicated I would be in Abingdon to link up with them late afternoon the next day. Note: Abingdon is in the very southwest corner of Virginia, just off of I-81. It is about a 6-½ hour drive from the suburbs of DC. I had planned to take Greyhound Bus Service from Springfield to Abingdon. I had already bought a ticket. Because the 13<sup>th</sup> was part of the Easter Holiday weekend, advance fare discounts were not available. The cost was to be about \$64 and the trip would take about 10 hours. However, my friend Phylissa Mundell had decided she would drive to Atlanta that weekend and would, in fact, deliver me to Abingdon. Getting tickets and planning a trip on Greyhound was easy. Canceling and getting some reimbursement was not. Bottom line is that after making a sizeable number of calls, I was told where to send the ticket and that I would receive reimbursement of 85%. (Note: Jack and George were both classmates of mine at USMA '64. George had been my roommate during Beast Barracks in 1960.)

### 13 April:

On the way to Abingdon, we stopped at the Groseclose exit where the AT makes its southernmost crossing of I-81. I wanted to reconnoiter the area and see if I could identify where the crossing took place, and assess the facilities that were there – Dairy Queen, Restaurant, Motel, etc. This proved fortuitous, because later on, based on my first-hand knowledge we took full advantage of this bit of civilization.

We arrived in Abingdon around 2:30. It is an old (seventeen hundreds) and absolutely charming place. Among other things, it has a large, grande hotel, and a theater called the Barter Theater. The latter got its name in depression days when people would barter farm produce to watch performances. As I understand it, the Barter Theater has seen numerous well-known performers (or those to become well known) and is a large regional draw. Jack and his wife Sam were living in temporary quarters virtually next door to the theater. They are doing this while scouting to buy some land upon which they plan to build a dome house. They are a very eclectic couple and plan to build it themselves. Among other things Jack has a Master's degree from MIT's Sloan School of business, was a snake handler for the Army's Ranger department, was Long Rang Patrol (LRP) leader in Vietnam where he was severely wounded, raises bees, etc, etc. Jack runs our class internet web site, has a personal relationship with Hugh Hefner (Playboy empire) that goes back over 30 years, and is personally an entrepreneur. He and Sam are very out-of-doors oriented and they not only provided George and me tremendous hospitality, but they bubbled with enthusiasm in support of our effort.

When I arrived Jack and George had already formed a tentative plan to which I readily agreed. The plan was for the three of us to hike together, without packs (called "slack-packing") for two days. The first day, Sam would drop us off about 24 miles North of Damascus and we would hike South to a point (dirt road crossing) about nine miles Closer to Damascus where Sam would pick us up. The next day we would start at the dirt road where we finished the previous day, and hike the remaining 15 miles into Damascus. This would provide several positive things.

- It would get us off to a "gentle" start by allowing us to get about 24 miles under our belts with only daypacks. Slack-packing is not frowned upon by most AT hikers in that the goal is the hiking – not how much you carry. Some people carry 50 lbs and others 30 lbs and others (very few) have people who meet them at most road crossings and seldom carry more than items for more than a couple days.
- It would allow Jack to participate with George and me for a couple days. He bought himself a small day pack to go and had hiking shoes adequate to this limited amount of effort. I call it limited, but as with most of the AT, the 24 miles we covered was mostly hills and Jack reported that it took him a week to recover from being stiff – and he is someone who does a lot of walking
- It would provide an assessment of what kind of shape I was in and my ability to keep up with George who had become "trail hardened" during the 450+ miles he had already hiked. Most AT thru-hikers (people intending to hike the entire 2160 miles of the AT), even with a bit of working out beforehand, start out able to cover only single digit mile distances initially, and work themselves into shape as they go along. After a while they are able to cover distances that new or occasional hikers usually can't match. Hence, later on, when friends/family link up to hike with them for sectors/periods, either the AT thru-hiker must slow down, or the sector hiker must have truly paid some training dues beforehand.

That night Sam provided us a wonderful dinner and since their temporary quarters had no dishwasher, we guys did the honors there. Jack provided us with a wonderful bit of wisdom that goes, "No man was ever shot by his wife while he was doing the dishes." Made sense to us.



## **14 April**

"Slack-Packed" 9.5 miles from north to south. We made sure we had a few survival items, a first aid kit, water and food to be eaten during the day. Started at Elk Garden, which is at the intersection of the AT and VA 600. We ran into some folks who were participating in a 300 miles race -- running, kayaking, and I don't know what else. Initially we climbed to 5,400 feet and went over White Top Mountain. It was like a meadow on top and very scenic. It was a clear day in the upper 70's with great visibility. On top, out of the tree line, it was quite windy -- a temptation to put on a jacket. However, we didn't tarry too long, and our exertions got us warm again as soon as we were into the wood line. George and I split leading our small team for the first couple hours. Then Jack got out front. He gave us a real workout -- especially on the level areas and down hills. Going up hill he labored a bit more than George and I. We took a nice break at Lost Mountain Shelter after about 7 miles. Jack and I hadn't seen one of these shelters before. It seemed relatively new and a neat place to spend the night. George told us it was a pretty nice as shelters go. As we were heading South we passed a number of hikers heading North who George knew (by trail names) and always there was a pleasant exchange and a few moments of chat. Sort of like a small society -- who was where? Where are you targeting for today? Where is what's his name? etc. George always made introductions. It was quite neat. We passed a number of delightful cascading mountains streams. Would have been nice to play at them and/or wade for a while, but we needed to move on and get to our pickup where Jack's wife, Sam, was waiting for us. Her willingness to stay by herself in a parked car out in the middle of nowhere really impressed me -- both by the giving of her time and the self-confidence and independence. After 9.5 miles we had to walk down a road for a half of a mile to the pickup point. Sam was there with some wonderfully received bottles of lemonade. As we drove toward the Price's home we stopped in Damascus. First at an ice cream parlor where we relaxed for a short while, and then at a trail outfitters. I had lost a rubber basket at the end of one of my trekking poles. They didn't have what I needed, but I didn't think that not having it would be a problem. It wasn't and I eventually lost the other basket as well.

When we got back to the Price's, George set up his one person tent (weighed less than 4 lbs) to air out and so that he could do some water proofing of the seams. Apparently most tents, when new, need to have such waterproofing applied and periodically re-applied to maintain the tents ability to remain fully protective in the rain.

We went out to an early supper in Abingdon at a nice restaurant called the Pepper Mill. The three of us guys looked like hikers and somewhat out of place in a very nice establishment. I was the only one who had grabbed a shower and was wearing shower sandals. However, both here and other places we went into not far from the trail seemed used to and accepting of AT hikers -- easy to spot. The big attraction at the Peppermill, per Jack and Sam, was curry-mushroom soup. We all had it and it was delicious. That evening we decided that we all had a good workout and were looking forward to another 14.5 mile slack-pack the next day. It being Sat evening before Easter, George and Sam went to church. I for one, tried, with some success, to get to bed earlier than the previous night when we stayed up talking until about midnight.

## **15 April (Easter Sunday)**

Started the day where the AT intersects with VA 859. That's the dirt and gravel road where we finished yesterday. Had a great breakfast with the Price's. Sam dropped off Jack, George and me. We slack-packed from VA 859 to Damascus -- about 14.5 miles. Had a little rain along the way but only for about an hour - - it was not a problem but got cool so we all put our rain jackets on. Took them off again when we took one of three breaks. Had plenty of ups and downs referred to by some as PUDS (Pointless Ups and Downs) but we all felt better at the end of today's 14.5 miles than yesterdays 9 miles where the PUDS were a bit steeper. I have more difficulty with the steep downs than anything. They cause the most pressure on my knees and bang up my feet.

I led the first two thirds of the way and the other guys liked the pace. We didn't want Jack out in front on the levels and down hills. Because of his long stride, we had trouble staying with him. On the up hills, we are in a bit better shape so Jack got in front. When we were on the trail heading south, we met a few northbound hikers, but not many. Most people on the trail use a trail name. George's is Rainger. We decided today that mine was The Hammer -- named for Judah (the Hammer) Maccabee. Judah led a successful rebellion in Judea in 168-165 BC against the Syrians and which upon which the holiday of Hanukah is centered. We met a fellow using the trail name, Christian. So, we met Christian on Easter Sunday on the Road to Damascus.

The trails were nice. Portions needing maintenance were well maintained. I did steeper -- but much, much shorter hills during my training -- all of which seems like it will pay off as long as my feet and knees hold out. Later on some of what I had called steep was trivialized by what we encountered. At any rate, the verdict was in that I appeared to be truly ready to get out there with George and do some heavy duty hiking.

We anticipated going to an ice cream parlor for milk shakes when we arrived in Damascus, but the one we chose was closed. We walked to another and pigged out. Then we walked to a hostel called The Place, called Sam, and waited to be picked up. While there we chatted with an array of hikers -- all male although we have seen a couple young women. An interesting array of people. Most were truly hikers -- some of whom we met again at other times on the trail, others seemed to be people who did minimal hiking but liked being part of the hiking scene.

One of the things I discovered today is that Jack and his wife don't have a TV and have never had one in 30+ years. Coincidentally, George also does not have a TV. There aren't many of these type folks around. To get two at the same time and place has got to be about one in a million. And my kids think I'm an anachronism because I don't have cable.

Sam made us a steak dinner and then we prepared for the next day when George and I would be fully on our own with full packs.

### **16 April**

This was our first day of hiking with packs fully loaded. George's weighed 45 lbs and mine 48 lbs. There were minor differences in what we carried, but I had more food. George previously lost over 20 lbs and had concluded that it was not practical to carry enough food to provide all the calories you needed for hiking. The solution was that, at every place you crossed a road or encountered some other opportunity to intake food, you needed to "top-off" your body. In fact, although about 15 lbs lighter than me, George, repeatedly, throughout our three weeks together, could dwarf me in the amount of food he could consume in one setting. At any rate, we both had too much weight, and later on we got a little lighter by carrying less food and eliminating items some items we had, initially, but which we didn't use.

Jack and Sam dropped us off at Elk Garden. This was where we had started our north to south slack-packing two days earlier. This time we were heading north. The previous two days we had hiked, primarily, in tee shirts. This day it was colder and we put on long-sleeve polypropylene shirts over the tee shirts. Between the coldness and the wind, there was a wind-chill that was daunting. After bidding farewell to Jack and Sam, I led a virtual charge up a long, bald hill. We were racing for the shelter of the wood line to get respite from the wind. When we finally got there, we were shivering. George put on his long johns (he had been in shorts) and we both put on glove liners. Our hands were practically numb from the cold. It took me a bit longer than George to get my gloves out and, hence, this provided my first lesson in placing things in my pack and that I might need to access quickly. We hiked up past Mt Rogers (5,729 ft) the tallest point in Virginia. The actual top was a little way down a side-trail and was reported not to have a view so we didn't detour to actually set foot on it. (So maybe we only reached 5,720.) We

stopped for a break at Thomas Knob Shelter where we met a man from Connecticut and his 13-year-old son. They were not AT hikers but were on their way to MT Rogers. They were going from state to state, and they had the goal of reaching the highest point in each one of the US States.

From Thomas knob we trekked to Wise Shelter. It was as much a true rock climbing expedition as it was what I had envisioned as trail hiking. Frankly I was mentally unprepared to encounter this sort of "trail." The folks from the local area who picked and maintained this piece of the AT went out of their way to make it difficult, and to take us to the top of every large rock heap in the area. We went through a number of high bald areas as well. The wind chill was not as fierce as it had been earlier, but I had to tie my hat on securely. There were several places where we encountered horses grazing. In fact, these were wild ponies, but they seemed placid and accustomed to passing hikers.

At Wise Shelter we took another break and then pushed on to the Old Orchard Shelter. Along the way I took a liter of water from a clear stream and made my first use of iodine tablets. They turned the water a sort of light yellow and give it a distinct flavor. At the time it didn't bother me. Later, as I used more of the tablets, I developed a real distaste for water that was so treated. However, under no avoidable circumstances were we going to consume untreated water.

We arrived at the Old Orchard Shelter a little after 5 PM after covering more than 15 miles. George noted several times how pleased he was about my hiking conditioning. It had taken him a while before he could cover that kind of mileage in similar terrain. He also noted he had sent (from the Prices) to his brother and son who were thinking about joining him later on, a description of the conditioning and preparatory steps I had taken, and suggested they try to emulate them as much as possible. When we arrived it was starting to get cold. As soon as possible, we got our boots off to air out our feet (and the boots). George had acquired in Damascus at the Dollar General store some very light shower sandals. I had some super light shower thongs, but these were not as effective. The reason was that the thong between the large toe and the next toes, prevented me from wearing them while still wearing socks (it was cold) and also the thongs rubbed against toes that were giving me some "hurt" on the trail. Two weeks later, when I had an opportunity to do so, in Pearisburg, I found a Dollar General store and spent \$3.50 to get a set of these light sandals that look like a poor man's Birkenstocks.

We shared the shelter (total capacity of 6) with a man from Tennessee and his two teenagers – a boy about 15 and a girl about 13 – and their two dogs. They were not AT hikers. They had parked at a road about 1.5 miles away and had hiked into the shelter. They were there when we arrived. The next day they planned to hike up to Mt Rogers. They seemed to understand trail courtesy very well, and quickly made room for us and made an effort to keep the dogs (well behaved) away from us. I might note that during the night one of the dogs roamed from its allotted place and woke up George after walking on him. Most hikers do not like dogs in the shelters and consider it poor form and inconsiderate to have them there. We cooked in front of the shelter. Because of a pretty strong and continuous wind, I would have been a long time getting my Esbit Stove tablets going without borrowing George's stove screen. I might note that I was the only one I encountered on the AT using the Esbit stove and tablets, but they worked real well. I made a Lipton's Noodle meal with a little too much water. This worked out great because it ended up as heavy-duty noodle soup, which hit the spot. It was getting colder and colder, and after eating, everyone got into his or her sleeping bags. Despite the cold I took off most of my clothes and brought them into the bag as a pillow. I warmed up adequately once zipped in. The sleeping bag seemed a bit confining and I was not fully accustomed to being fully zipped in. My ¾ length ultra light pad wasn't uncomfortable, but in the sleeping bag, I kept sliding off of it. In fact, the floor of the shelter was tilted toward the open area, and I almost slid out of the shelter a couple times. I didn't sleep real well. At least I kept waking up throughout the night. I also had to get used to the sleeping noises everyone else was making in these close quarters. A high wind was coming across an open area into the open front of the shelter. I was on one side, and the shelter logs were not airtight, so some wind was coming in there as well.

I had used a urine bottle sometime during the night, but, after filling it up, had to go again later during the middle of the night. When I did so, it was snowing. It was also a little eerie with what sounded like a coyote howling the entire time I was up. The snow was blowing into the shelter so the bottoms of our bags were getting damp. A little snow was also coming in through the cracks on my side of the shelter. Hence my stuff got a little wetter than the others' did.

### **17 April**

By daylight everything was covered with snow and it was still snowing and blowing. Both were occurring with some strength. The man from Tennessee asked his kids what they wanted to do. They really weren't equipped for the snow, and without hesitation the daughter said, "Let's go back to the car and get home as fast as we can." Her Father agreed that what she said made good sense, and they left pretty quickly. I might note that when he had arrived in Damascus several days earlier, George had shipped home most of his heavy duty winter gear, but we both had enough stuff to deal with what was occurring. For breakfast, George heated up some water and I used some of it for instant oatmeal. I opened the package and put it into my cup which served as holder. Then I poured the water right into the package. This allowed me to make the oatmeal without making the cup or my pot dirty and necessitating a cleanup effort.

We packed out in about 3-4 inches of snow wearing three layers – tee shirts, LS polypropylene shirts, and relatively heavy duty rain jackets with hoods. George had long johns under his shorts and short gaiters covering the tops of his boots and which reached above the boots for four or five inches. My boots went higher up the leg than did George's and I had my long pants tucked in. George's protection from deeper snow was a little better than mine because of the gaiters. The first 1.5 miles were downhill, but not super steep, so it was relatively easy. However, it was continuing to snow at a good rate and it was really a winter wonderland. We didn't have too much difficulty but the snow did keep getting a little deeper. Then we had about a two mile uphill climb that was a butt-kicker. The snow actually provided a plus in absorbing foot shock, but it also would hide smaller rocks. Also, as we contoured on hills we had to be a bit extra cautious. That translates to going slower. By late morning, the snowfall was ebbing and flowing. It would seem to almost stop, and then it would come howling back a few minutes later. At Dickey Gap (where the AT intersects with VA 650 next to VA 16) we had hiked more than 10 miles. We thought about going on a few more miles to a shelter, but we were wet. We knew the weather for that night was projected to get even colder, and the snow was not showing signs of stopping. We left the trail and hitched a ride in a pickup truck to Troutdale to the Troutdale Trading Post. We had some homemade meatloaf etc. It was terrible, but seemed wonderful at the time and we were very happy to be sheltered. We then called the Fox Hill Inn, which was a few miles away, and the owner picked us up. He is a Princeton Grad who chucked plans to be in the State Dept in lieu of farming, and he opened the Inn as a side line. He had a young couple who were former AT thru-hikers working for him as the inn keepers and he gives special rates to AT hikers. George and I shared a room. The entire place was lovely and would merit a visit by anyone in the area. We used the kitchen that evening to cook our own food and were served breakfast in the a.m. It had been literally howling weather through the night, and we both agreed our decision making had been good. I might note that among the pamphlets in the Inn was one about Troutdale which declared it was the smallest incorporated village in VA (pop 272 although the innkeepers said it had grown some) and had the highest elevation of any incorporated village in the state.

### **18 April**

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes, juice and tea, the innkeeper from the Fox Hill Inn dropped us off at the AT where we had left it the afternoon before. We hiked 14.5 miles to the Partnership Shelter, which is only a few hundred yards from the Mt Rogers Park Headquarters. Compared to previous days, the terrain was moderate. The day started with the temperature in the high 20's and seemed threatening, but it remained decent for hiking. By 3 p.m. it was in the 40's in the sun

and just above freezing in the shade. Hiking was pretty much in snow. On one of the ridge lines, because of the drifting, we spent a half mile or so in snow 9-12 inches deep. George's gaiters and my long pants tucked into high boots were essential. This was the day I abandoned the web belt I had been wearing. In conjunction with the pack, it had been giving me a rub – a welt slowly increasing in size and irritation. I put it in my pack (later tossed it when we could get rid of trash as it weighed four ounces or so and cost little) and started using a piece of nylon cord instead. This worked for the remainder of the trip.

The partnership shelter was only a couple years old and was somewhat different from other shelters I saw. It included piping for potable water and a shower in a stall adjacent to it (both not yet turned on because of the risk of frozen pipes), and it had two levels. Each level had capacity for eight people. Since the park headquarters was nearby and open till 5 p.m., we were able to use their real-world rest rooms, buy some candy bars, and fill ourselves, and our containers, with potable water. There was even a pay phone available. We got there about 4 p.m. and thought we might have the shelter to ourselves. About 5 p.m. two young hikers from Florida came in. They had gone off the trail into Marion and tried unsuccessfully to hitch a ride back. As a result of this lack of success, they had hiked an extra six miles, and they were not at all happy about it. They went to the upper level and George and I stayed on the lower level. At 7:15 were zipped into our bags and George was snoring away. Essentially, we would get in our bags at or very close to dark. Around 8 p.m. a young fellow from Westfield, New Jersey who used the trail name "Night Train" arrived. He had met George early on but had gotten way ahead. However, he left the trail for a week to go home for Easter and had just returned. He and three other hikers had completed a feat that had most on the trail talking about them. They had hiked 26 hours straight -- through the night using headlamps on a moonlit night and covered 50 miles. However, I soon found that this was not what gave him his trail name. When he fell asleep he snored loud and steadily the entire night. Between him and George's loud, but intermittent honking, at times it seemed I might have been surrounded by a herd of rutting elephants. The temperature that night dropped to the low 20's. Again, I stripped down pretty low and used my clothes as a pillow. I was also very glad to have a urine bottle – something for which the youngsters on the trail had no need, but which proved itself to be very helpful to the elder set on the trail. It was a good option to getting up and out in the middle of the night to relieve myself. I had started doing better maneuvering in the sleeping bag, and had consequently, was no longer sliding off of my sleeping pad. Never-the-less both Night Train (who had the same  $\frac{3}{4}$  length Thermo-Light pad as I did) and I agreed that we would go a different way on pads if we had it to do over. George had something called a Z-Rest pad. It didn't inflate and folded rather than rolled up, but it seemed to work better.

### **19 April**

Started the day again with Oatmeal. George broke out some Ritz Crackers that were totally intact. I had a few packages of cheese and crackers that were almost crushed to cracker meal, so I asked George how he had keep his intact. He said, for what it's worth, that the secret was that his crackers were round, versus the square ones I had, and this made them less susceptible to crushing. This day we hiked 11.5 miles to where the AT went into Grossclose. This was the place I had reconnoitered during my car ride to Abingdon. The snow was mostly, but not all, gone, and we were at lower elevations than we had been. It was still cold enough though that we wore our long sleeved polypropylene shirts over our tee shirts. At one point, about six miles away from the Interstate we stopped on a big rock on the ridgeline and could see the entire section of valley toward which we were heading. It was pretty grand. Another time, on a high hill top, maybe 1.5 miles from our destination we took a break on a sunny grassy area that was shielded from the wind, but, again, with a terrific view. We lingered a while because it was so pleasant.

When we got down to Grossclose we checked into the motel (\$40 for a double room), ate at the Dairy Queen, and socialized with a few other hikers who were there. One was a fellow with the trail name of "Harry Carey." He had recently left the Navy where he had been a helicopter pilot. Harry was thru-hiking the entire 2,160 miles of the AT, but what made him unique was that he had hiked about 500 miles from Pensacola, Florida just to get to the start of the AT at Springer Mountain in North Georgia. We also

met a couple from New England named "Gidget" and "Slack." They were hiking with their dog and were spending several days in the motel because their dog had injured his paw and they were giving it a chance to heal. I found out that dogs normally carry packs that contain their own food. Also Night Train and Footsteps spent the night at the same motel. George and I went to sleep early to get ready for an early start the next morning.

## **20 April**

Shortly after it opened – I think it was around 7 a.m., we went to the motel's restaurant and ordered substantial breakfasts. Footsteps had gotten there before us, and he was finishing up an order of three very large pancakes of which he ate only two. After he left, when the waitress went over to clear his table, George noticed the uneaten pancake and piped across the room to the waitress "don't throw that pancake away." He asked her to add it to his order, and unflinchingly she did so. That restaurant clearly does a lot of business with hikers. During this day we hiked 14.5 miles with seven major climbs and descents -- a lot of work. At one time, I did a very graceful slide down a small mud embankment. George saw it happening and was powerless to help. I almost recovered but my momentum, especially with the weight of the backpack, couldn't be stopped. My lower body and hands were covered with mud, but I was unhurt. There was nothing else for the two of us to do but laugh. I might note that had I been wearing shorts in lieu of long pants, I probably would have had a heck of a lot more difficulty getting cleaned up. Over the course of a couple hours, the mud on my pants dried up and could be, largely, brushed off. We spent the night at the Knot Maul Branch Shelter. It held six people. Night Train, Harry Carey, Mountain Man and another hiker (I think it was Footsteps) were there with us by 5:30 p.m. and had filled the shelter's six person capacity. Around 7:30 three additional hikers, "Zack," "Dusty" and "Moto" showed up. Zack and Dusty were traveling together and were moving fast and light. They rigged up a tarp (versus a tent) real quickly. Moto had neither tent nor tarp, so we made room for him in the shelter. He had been traveling much heavier and had gotten hurt. In his renewed effort he not only was not prepared to provide shelter for himself, but he also carried no cooking capability. The latter was no big deal if he wanted to sustain himself on cold food, but the former lost him respect among other hikers on whom he imposed.

## **21 April**

I had had a good night's sleep, but there was a lot of action on the other side of the shelter where George and a few others were protecting their gear from mice and chasing them away. One of the things people do, in addition to hanging their food, is to open all the various packets in their backpack so the mice won't try to gnaw their way in to look around. George had at least one hole gnawed in his clothing. I might note that in the shelters, there are usually enough nylon cords with "lids" for the occupants to hang their food bags. By "lids" (my term) I am referring to small cans, tied into the cord upside down. These block the mice from traveling down the cords to the food bags.

We hiked 19 miles to Jenkins Shelter. This was George's longest hike to that point, and we did it with pack's and over difficult terrain. We climbed up Chestnut Ridge to Chestnut Knob Shelter where we took a break. This was in a bald area on a mountain top and was the only fully enclosed shelter and one made of stone I encountered during my hiking. I was told there were some stone shelters further south than Virginia. When we got up there, the wind was very high and it was cold. When we entered the shelter we found a few other hikers there for a rest as well. Since there was no nearby water, it wasn't a good overnight point for most of us. While there, Night Train shared a bag of marshmallows he had taken from the campers' box at the motel in Grossclose. Places that are frequented by hikers often have such boxes where hikers place items they don't want to carry with them, and other hikers are free to scarf things out of these boxes.

When we left the shelter we followed the ridgeline of Garden Mountain that overlooked a valley called Burkes Garden. It was a beautiful place that had been settled a couple centuries ago. The story goes that

prior to the building of the Biltmore by one of the "robber barons" he had wanted to buy up land in Burkes Garden as the site of his palatial home to be. However, no one was willing to sell his or her land.

The 19 miles was more difficult than we had anticipated and it about did us in by the time we got to our destination. Once there, we met "Coach" (a wrestling coach who was sector hiking), "Blind Eagle" who was heading south toward Damascus, and "Hotspur," a college professor of English from Indiana. Hotspur had started his AT adventure with a lady friend, but she quit after a while. The straw that broke the camel's back for her was when she peed in her pants because she was too tired to get her pack off in time to avoid doing so. Hotspur was named for a Shakespearean character from Henry IV. We chatted a bit about Henry V which contains my favorite passages from the Bard. That night George and I ate the two freeze dried meals I had been toting for a special occasion such as the triumphal effort we had just completed. These meals are really good stuff but quite expensive, and, although not too heavy, they have a lot of bulk. The screw holding the knob on to my pot lid had come off and I feared I had lost it. Fortunately, I found it in my mouth while eating my spaghetti with meat sauce, and I didn't crack my teeth or swallow it. Going forward, I repeatedly checked to make sure that the screw for the pot lid remained snugly fastened in place.

### **22 April**

Hiked 14 miles along Brushy Mountain to Helvey's Mill Shelter. No major climbs but, there were many small hills so we were up and down all day and worked very hard. It didn't show as such on the map, but the last hill was really tough. All of a sudden we were in weather that had temperatures in the mid-80's. Sweat was pouring out of us. I drank three quarts of water but it wasn't enough and dehydrated. We should have hitched into Bland to hydrate and eat when we crossed VA 52 about 2 miles before the shelter, but we didn't. A bad decision. The water source near the shelter was a very small stream and difficult to use, and it was a long downhill walk away. I tried to pump water using the Sweetwater Pump I carried. It had worked o.k. previously, but the filter was apparently clogged up. I spent about 40 minutes working at it and only got 2 liters. It should have taken about two minutes a liter. Later in the evening Hotspur said he had a brush for cleaning the filter and did so for me. After the filter cleaning, during the next day, the pump worked great for a few more quarts, then clogged again. The water filter pumps do work great – when they're working, but they seem to clog up easily (based on experience of others as well as me), so you need to have cleaning tools and have other options. That evening, even though there was room in the shelter, Hotspur tented about 50 yards away. Said there was too much snoring in the shelter. Mountain Man and Night Train were in the shelter with George and me. That evening there were several hoot owls that chose to communicate throughout the night. They kept me up for a while and woke me off and on, but I still slept well.

### **23 April**

Mountain Man was gone by the time I woke up just before 6:30 a.m. Others told me I had done some good snoring, myself, the night before. The temperature was due to go to the high 80's and it did. We hiked in the a.m. to Jenny Knob Shelter. That was almost 10 miles away from our start. We got there about mid-day and took a two hour break. Night Train joined us after a while. We hydrated, avoided walking in the mid-day heat, and took off all our clothes to air them as well as our bodies. While there I almost fell into the outhouse. The entire seat did a major shift, and made some real loud noises. George and Night Train said they had worried about me.

After the break we hiked another 6.5 miles to where the AT crosses VA 606. The sweat was again pouring out of us. We had planned to camp near Kimberly Creek that parallels the road, but it didn't look very promising. Iodine tablets and filters notwithstanding, low land creeks are risky because of stuff that goes into them or over which nearby water flows -- e.g. cow dung, human trash, etc. In this case the surrounding ground was not real good for pitching tents, and we later discovered there was a saw mill about a half mile upstream. While George and I were considering the situation, Night Train caught up

with us. The three of us hid our packs in the brush and walked up VA 606 to Trent's Grocery Store. I immediately downed two 20 ounce bottles of Gatorade (the others did likewise). We got some sandwiches (terrible but good to get) and I had a slice of one of those pre-made, kept under a heating lamp, pizzas. It actually seemed pretty good at the time. We also used the men's room and were able to wash the sweat off our hands and faces. I then bought 4 more 20 ounce bottles of Gatorade. Two I drank within half an hour, and two more went into water containers. When we got back to our packs, Night Train moved out ahead of us and continued on. He was a much faster hiker.

George and I decided to move on also until we found a good campsite. It was getting close to sunset and we had covered an additional mile when we came to a side trail that went to the Dismal Falls (actual name on map is The Falls of Dismal) Camp Ground. It was a half mile off of the AT and we were not of a mind to cover any unnecessary ground. It stayed with our packs and George scouted further down the AT for about a third of a mile and found a great camp site that was close to Dismal Creek. We made camp without problem and pitched out tents about 25-30 yards apart. This allowed us to communicate if we wanted, but minimized the hearing of each other's night noises. I slept great. I had a nice leafy cushion under my tent floor. It took a little more time to set up and to close up in the a.m. as compared with the shelters, but I concluded that tenting – even near the shelters, was the way to go. It seemed to me that as it got warmer it would become more preferable. This was because in the shelters the body odors and mice would get worse, the shelters would get more crowded as seasonal hikers came out in larger numbers, and tents would offer a lot more protection from bugs that would be around in ever greater numbers.

We covered about 18 miles this day in very hot weather and were very pleased with the decisions we had made regarding a major mid-day break, diverting to the grocery store, and how, when, and where we spent the night.

#### **24 April**

After breaking camp we got going around 8 a.m. We hiked rapidly (for us) to Waipiti Shelter. We were concerned about the difficulty in the heat of about a 1,400 foot climb up Sugar Run Mountain. We decided to take a good break before doing the climb and to take it as measuredly as possible. Early on we had reached agreement that George would be the leader during major climbs and I would be the leader during major descents. I tended to be more aggressive in attacking hills and George would keep a little slower be steadier pace. On downhills, I would slow down more, and this helped protect our knees and feet from the beating that came with steep downhill efforts. George did a great job in leading us up to the ridgeline. By the time we were there, the weather had turned chilly. The previous day it was in the high 80's. Now it was in the 40's with a breeze. We had planned to stay at Tillie Wood's hostel called Wood's Hole which was about a 12 mile hike. The guide book said it was only opened during May and June, but in Grossclose we had been told it was already opened. It was accessible by road and only 10 miles from Pearisburg. George had arranged for his lady friend, Linda Thomas, who was coming up from Poplarville, Mississippi to meet us on the 25<sup>th</sup> very near the Hostel at Sugar Run Gap. The idea was she would provide us some refreshment and pickup our packs so we could slack-pack the last leg into Pearisburg. About 40 minutes before we got to Wood's Hole we ran into Night Train who told us that we had bad info, and that Wood's Hole wasn't open yet. By this time it had started to rain. George and I knew we had no way to contact Linda and needed to be near Sugar Run Gap in the morning. We were wet and quite chilled and decided to head for Wood's Hole anyway. We figured that, even if it was closed, there might be a porch we could use for shelter.

The hostel was a full half mile off of the trail. It was an oak log building and the sign outside the fence didn't say hostel so we approached it warily. We were greeted warmly by two gentlemen in their 80's named "Hi-Pockets" and "Re-Run." Both had hiked the trail while in their 60's. Re-Run, now living in Harper's Ferry, had retired from being a service manager at Lindsey Cadillac in the DC area, and had done the entire AT five times. Hi-Pockets lived in Atlanta and was a fellow Georgia Tech grad. The hostel



was crude but seemed heaven-sent to George and me. We were the only ones there and were the 2d and 3d hikers of the season. The previous day Harry Carey had been the first. We stowed our gear in the bunk house that was on the second floor that we accessed via a ladder. The bunkhouse actually had lights. It was still quite cold and not at all wind proof, but it certainly offered decent shelter, had wall to wall mattress covering most of it, a couple chairs, and small tables. There was an outhouse, and potable water nearby. There was also a solar shower, but considering the weather that continued to get colder, the solar shower was of little interest.

After we got our gear upstairs and had gotten dry clothes on ourselves, "Ms Tillie" came out of her log cabin to greet us. I call it a cabin but it was more sophisticated. It was built of Chestnut logs in the 1890's and she and her husband Roy bought and lived in it in the early 1940's while he was a graduate student at VPI – now known as Virginia Tech. Roy (now deceased) retired as a senior official (SES and Assistant Secretary of the Interior) of the Government. They had been renting out their cabin for about 40 years as a hunting lodge, but in the late 80's they took back occupancy and fixed it up. Shortly after fixing up their cabin, the Tillie and her husband opened their hostel for AT hikers. Staying there is free. All that was asked was that those who came do something like put a few stones on a wall that needed repeated attention. George and I gladly put back up a nice section of wall. Tillie lives in the Atlanta area in Roswell, Georgia. She normally comes up to Wood's Hole for two months and has various friends like Re-Run, Hi-Pockets and a couple neighbors in Roswell – Eric and Cynthia, help her open up and stay with her for various periods of time.

Later we were invited to visit in the cabin, which was a wonderful place. It had a roaring fire and was truly made into a comfortable home. We were very warmly received and all enjoyed each other's company. George took over the splitting of some logs for the fireplace – he knows about these things. I helped get a new battery operated clock set, running, and hung. It wasn't as simple as it sounds. An interesting sidelight is that when they moved in there was a stream not far away, but not near enough to be heard in the cabin. Because Tillie really like to hear the sound of the stream, Roy actually changed the stream's path so it could be heard in the cabin. That was a lot of work. When the household was about to eat supper, George and I retreated to the bunkhouse. Before we left, however, we were each treated to a delicious homemade apricot turnover. Downstairs from the bunk house there was an open but sheltered area where we cooked our meals using our own stoves, and there was a refrigerator with soft drinks and candy that you paid for via the honor system. Wood's Hole was a highlight of our hiking.

## **25 April**

Overnight the mice had been active in the bunkhouse, and in the morning I finally saw one. George had had a hole gnawed in one of his pants pockets. One of the things that Tillie Wood offers the hikers who stay in her hostel is breakfast. The first eight hikers who sign up for breakfast at \$3.50 eat with her in the morning in her cabin. George and I, being no dummies, signed up and we had grits, eggs and sausage along with juice and coffee. It was a very sociable breakfast, and, as we were the only hikers present, her other house guests all ate with us as well. Afterwards Linda arrived and took our packs. It was about 9:00 a.m. and the temperature had warmed up considerably to 39 degrees. It warmed a little more over the course of the day and we had great hiking conditions. We took some pictures and then made our farewells at Wood's Hole.

We had 10 miles of hiking to get to Pearisburg. At first the trail was quite rocky, then it turned very pleasant. In fact it was too pleasant because we didn't maintain our focus, and we missed a not very well marked turn. We only discovered this when we came to another trail intersection and couldn't find any of the white blazes that mark the AT. We sought such blazes to tell us which fork to turn on to. After a while during which we explored both directions, we back-tracked. When we finally got back on course we had lost at least an hour and had done heck of a lot of extra walking. The turn we missed was onto a very steep climb to the ridgeline of Pearis Mountain. Once on top we followed the ridgeline to the

northwest toward Pearisburg and had gorgeous views. At one point we saw a snake that was about 2 1/2 feet long which we couldn't identify. It was light green with yellow lengthwise stripes. It scurried off of the path just in front of me. It did not appear to be of the pit viper family – i.e. poisonous.

Shortly before beginning our descent off of the ridgeline we came to a breathtaking overlook. We sat there and watched birds soar from above them and just luxuriated in the beauty. About a quarter mile further on there was a rocky place, just before the descent, called Angel's Rest. It was interesting, but we liked the overlook better. The descent to Pearisburg was very long and very steep.

Once we got there we went to the Rendezvous Motel which is right where the AT crosses a road. It is actually in a place called Bluff City but has a Pearisburg mail address. I had sent my re-supply box to the motel and Brenda; the owner/manager was able to provide it to me as soon as we arrived. She also was very helpful and went out of her way to get me in contact with Trent's grocery where I had left an expensive, borrowed, hat two days before. Our lady friends Phylissa and Linda joined George and me in Pearisburg. We cleaned up and had a great meal at a gem of an Italian restaurant named Bella Vista. The setting of Pearisburg was beautiful. It was on the New River and was surrounded by green rolling hills and mountains.

As we were driving around after dinner to find the Dollar General Store so I could replace my shower thongs with sandals, we saw Hotspur and Night Train walking along the side of the road. They had checked into the local church-run hostel and had been unsuccessfully looking for some social life. We gave them a ride back to the hostel (a couple miles and not at all well placed vis-à-vis the AT). The hostel wasn't much, but compared to the trail it was great. Just as we were leaving Harry Carey was coming up the hill to the shelter. I stopped and chatted with him for a short while. He moved on the next day, and this was the last time I saw him as well as the two fellows we had given rides.

## **26 April**

This was a rest day, and we had really nice weather. Phylissa drove me back to Kent's grocery on VA 606 near Bland to get the hat I had left there. It was a surprisingly long trip, but it was beautiful countryside. Not too far from our destination we passed a prison farm. After retrieving my hat we went to the Falls of Dismal – the place George and I had bypassed a few days previously. What a beautiful spot! It's about a mile up a Rd just past Kent's Grocery on VA 606. The road is initially blacktop and turns to dirt and gravel. There is no sign for the falls, but the road widens and the falls are maybe a hundred yards off of the road. We went skinny dipping for short moments – the water being ice cold. We also chatted with a couple hikers who later came in on the other side of the falls. After a while we drove around the base of Brushy Mountain and took VA 663 toward Sugar Run Gap until we came to, and visited at Wood's Hole. We had a great visit chatting with Tillie Woods and Hi-Pockets while sitting in the sun. The place was a bit more organized than when George and I had been there two days before. Tillie said they had a fellow who serviced cesspools come in from Princeton, West Virginia to pump out the outhouse. He said it was the first time he had been called to pump out an outhouse in 16 years. We also obtained very nice walking sticks made by a fellow named Don Cole. He makes them as a hobby and gives them away to hikers via Woods Hole.

Later that day George told me that Hotspur had decided to leave the trail. He had hiked about 700 miles and had had enough. He and his lady friend who had departed earlier were getting back together. George and Linda had driven Hotspur to the bus station in Christiansburg earlier in the day.

## **27 April**

Linda dropped George and me off at 8:15 a.m. near the Pine Swamp Shelter in the Peters Mountain Wilderness so we could slack-pack, north to south, back to Pearisburg. This was about 20 miles of hiking. We had an initial steep climb of about 1,400 feet to the ridgeline. We traveled along the ridgeline for

several miles where it was the defacto border between Virginia and West Virginia, and we had spectacular views. Near the end we had a very steep, long descent into Pearisburg. Some of the trail was composed of very nasty rocks. We had said several times that we needed to take a picture of that type of "trail" and during the descent we finally did so.

Along the way we ran into three guys from Atlanta who were part of a group of five North Georgia College graduates, Class of '69, who get together each year for a week to hike a segment of the AT. One of them made particular note that I was wearing Army combat boots. He was carrying a full pack and appeared very fit. The two fellows with him were carrying very little and seemed to be a bit less lean. I asked about the pack and he said he carried it simply as a personal idiosyncrasy as part of his trail hiking.

We stopped for a break at the Star Haven Shelter. There was no water source for this shelter but we met two hikers that were new to me. One was named "Maestro." He was a young man from Burke, VA and his parents live about two miles from my home. He adapted the name Maestro because he carried a miniature guitar and would occasionally play music in the evenings. The other was named "Spur." He said he was repeatedly was being confused with Hotspur and hoped that would end when we told him Hotspur had left the trail. Spur seemed to me to be about mid-40's. He said he was in the process of conducting his 4<sup>th</sup> thru-hike of the AT, but that he would be taking time off in about a month to get married. George and I thought about that later as we were walking, and we couldn't quite make all the motivational pieces fit. In fact, we couldn't really figure out why anyone would want to do the entire trail more than one time. We also met "Corndog" on the trail and overtook a young couple named "Caboose" and "Mailman" who were hiking north to south. They had started at Harper's Ferry. After they reached Springer Mountain in Georgia, they planned to "flip-flop" and do the remainder of the AT north of Harper's Ferry.

Along the way my left shin started hurting severely and became inflamed. I thought it was probably shin splints, but later learned that it was probably part of the symptoms by which I was diagnosed as needing treatment for Lyme disease. That's another story. Near the end we approached a large Celanese factory. The trail kept us in the woods skirting around this factory for quite a while – probably about a mile and a half. This area had lots of short ups and downs and reminded me of the area near Fountainhead Park in Fairfax County where I had trained. The hike ended with about half a mile of walking on road and across a bridge over the New River. The hike was tougher than we had projected and we ran low on water. Before finishing we sucked down soft drinks from a vending machine at a store adjacent to the road and were sorely dehydrated still.

### **28 April**

Another rest day. I had used ice packs on my shin, but it was in bad enough shape that I was worried about my ability to continue on the trail. In addition to icing it, I stayed off of it most of the day. In the a.m. I went to the Pearisburg Public Library and spent a couple hours on a computer catching up on and cleaning out e-mail. Phylissa and I then went to a formal recreation area not far from Cascade Falls. We picnicked near a beautiful babbling brook, and I put my left lower leg in the icy water for as long as I could stand the cold. The actual falls were actually two miles away on a trail, and I declined to make that hike.

### **29 April**

George and I were brought back out to near Pine Swamp Branch Shelter, where we had begun our 20 mile north to south slack-pack on the 27<sup>th</sup>, to begin hiking northward. Because my ability to hike was in question, and because there was a road crossing after about 2.3 miles, Phylissa drove to the road crossing. The idea was that if I felt I could continue on, great. If not, I would jump ship there and she would take me with her back to Northern VA. I had some mild discomfort, but when we reached the road crossing I decided to tough it out and continue on the trail.

Given I started hiking in Damascus with 48 lbs, I would estimate that I started this segment of hiking with about five lbs less – 43 lbs. This was because I was carrying less food and had weeded out of my pack and sent home several items I didn't need or had too much of. E.g. Headlamp, Water Filter which wasn't working, some of the spare batteries, many of the Esbit tablets, and one or two smaller items. I was, however, carrying a 20 ounce water bottle in addition to the two liters I had already been carrying.

After we left Phylissa, we started a long, uphill climb of about a mile and a half. We felt we did well and took a break at the Bailey Gap Shelter. Along the way we encountered two young men who had hiked from Virginia Beach to the AT. They were heading south to Damascus, and from there intended to hike across the country to the West Coast.

At the break I noticed that one of my boots seemed to be succumbing to the rigors of the trail. It looked like the uppers were starting to separate from the sole at the front of the boot. I tried a couple times over the next two days to repair it with duct tape but the tape didn't stay on. I really didn't have enough tape to try to do the repairs properly. However, even without such repairs, fortunately, the boot held out as long as was needed. After leaving Bailey Gap Shelter we encountered two miles of trail that had previously been described to us as "two miles of trail from hell." The description was apt. It was continuous nasty rocks for that entire segment.

After covering about 12 miles we got to War Spur Shelter around 3 p.m. and decided to call it a day. There was a great water source/stream nearby and I tried to soak my left foot and shin, but it was so cold, I could only leave them in the water a few minutes. Shortly after our arrival Footsteps and "Sugar Bear" (a sand blaster from the Norfolk, VA area) showed up. We had passed them earlier in the day and were expecting them. George and I decided to use the shelter along with Footsteps because we wanted an early start the next day. We were targeting a tough 18 miles. Sugar Bear tented near by – says the ground is more comfortable (I agree.) Later that evening "Lumberjack" (he was built like one and had a beard that was as black as could be. From Falls Church, VA) and his hiking partner from Richmond, "Closer" (reflects his ability and willingness to finish/close out his meals and that of anyone else around) came. Also "Wolverine" and "Spartan" (two brothers from Michigan who early-on had become known as "The Arson Brothers" for building large camp fires) and a few other hikers came to the shelter. It was quite a reunion. George had hiked with several of these people early in his trip. They had gotten ahead of him, but for various reasons (e.g. one of the Arson Brothers got sick) had left the trail for short periods and had come back. Getting one of these 40+ lb. Packs on requires a bit of effort – and practice. Among other things Lumberjack was known for being able to take his backpack and flip it over his head while inserting his arms. I might note that I was quite proficient at swing my pack around and on and draw positive comment in that regard as well.

### **30 April**

We hiked 18 miles over Johns Creek Mountain, down through Sinking Creek Valley and up across Sinking Creek Mountain. Very early in our hiking we saw two White Tailed Deer. After about eight miles we crossed VA 42. When we did so we saw a sign on a fence post (several mules were enclosed in the field) that cold drinks, candy, fruit, etc were for sale at a nearby farm house. We went up there. A family with three school-age children (8, 10 and 18) whom the parents had always home-schooled was leasing the house. The father was involved with forestry products and was a VA Tech grad. It was an interesting visit sitting on the front porch talking with the mother and the kids as we scarfed down food and drink – coke, snickers, fruit and yogurt. I also bought a gallon of spring water to replace all of the iodine treated water I had been carrying as well as get a lot of water into my body. It was another sweltering day.

The second tough climb of the day was to Braiser's Knob on Sinking Creek Mountain. The end of it was almost vertical. When we reached the ridgeline three wild goats greeted us. They headed straight for George's legs to lick off the salt. Actually I thought George and the blonde goat had a thing for each other. George did not seem to enjoy it. The goats left me alone since I was wearing long pants. I believe I was the only hiker we saw who wore long pants even in the hot weather. Once on the latter ridgeline we had a long stretch where we had to balance ourselves walking across the sides of rock faces and climbing rocks which were quite intimidating. In fact they seemed very dangerous. If you tripped or slipped – especially with heavy backpacks, you were going to be going a long way down and some of it would be free-fall. Later, as we were coming off the ridgeline we came up on Maestro who was stopped on the trail. He had come up on a large Timber Rattlesnake. The snake was just off of the trail. At first I didn't see it, but, as I started to go by, it made its presence clearly known. I made a quick alteration in my route and we swung widely around it. Maestro stayed back to watch the snake as it was the first rattle he had encountered in the wild.

Near the end of the hike, as I was hustling downhill and anxious to get to the shelter, I tripped and fell. The momentum of the backpack multiplies the risk of injury and loss of control. I was really fortunate I did not get hurt, but it did give me a reality check. We were quite tired and I was going too fast given that and the trail conditions. We slowed down. There were a dozen people at or in the vicinity of the (Nidday) shelter this night and there was lots of camaraderie and talk about the day's experience. This was a tough day, but one that seemed very rewarding.

### **1 May**

This was a 16 mile day. The first part was easy, but the latter was a killer. We started out with a big climb (1,500 ft) up to Brush Mountain. The map profile shows it as very steep, but as big climbs go in that area it was not too difficult. Once on the ridgeline, we had great trail (i.e. good footing without rocks). Along the way, after about five miles, we passed the Audie Murphy monument. For some of the younger folks, Audie Murphy was the most decorated soldier of World War II – by the time he was 21 years old. He died about 30 years ago in a plane crash at the site of the monument. At mid-day we took a break by a stream (Trout Creek) with nine miles under our belt. We thought we had it made. At the stream we ran into a handful of other hikers who were also breaking, filling up with water, and grabbing something to eat. It was a pleasant and fairly social interlude

Then we climbed again to the Cove Mountain ridgeline as we were heading towards one of the more infamous geographic features on the trail – The Dragon's Tooth. Once on the ridgeline we encountered one steep and rocky knob after another. The maps and elevation profiles did not do them justice. Each time we climbed one we repeatedly would say, "this must be it – Dragon's Tooth." Time after time it was not, but it was tremendously exhausting and we, again, were working through our water quickly. We had to climb over huge rocks on each knob. Along the way, we found "Trail Magic." That is food or refreshment that someone just left for hikers. In this instance George saw a can of orange soda on the trail. It was warm but wet and fizzy, and we delighted in it as we shared it.

Finally we got to the knob that, in fact was Dragon's Tooth. It was a little bit higher than the others were, but its renown came from the difficulty in traversing the rocks. It lived up to its billing. It required climbing hand over foot on huge rocks with minimal footing and huge drop offs would have been the penalty for missteps or slipping. Getting to the top was very difficult and treacherous. Getting down the other side was even more challenging and downright intimidating. There were places we had to sit and let ourselves down by our hands. There were two different places where the only way down was via metal ladder/climbing rungs embedded in the rock. The footing was even more difficult and the drops were often out into space. Of course it was a little more interesting for us because of rain. It hadn't rained in days -- watering places were dried up. However, just as we were in the middle of negotiating the Dragon's Tooth, it started to rain, and for a short while it was pretty hard. There was really no place

to stop or we might have done so. Once we got past the Dragon's Tooth, of course the rain stopped, and we began a steep descent off of the ridgeline. We went past Lost Spectacles Gap and over Rawies Rest. The trail was very difficult and we had numerous little knobs with very big rocks that we had to climb over. In fact, I again fell but received minimal scrapes. We continued down to VA 624 not far from its intersection with VA 311. The last seven miles of the day (the map said it was that distance) took us five exhausting hours. We received feedback from other hikers (the young guys) that they, too, found it exhausting.

As we approached VA 624, about 100 yards from the road we encountered a "Trail Angel" named "Southpaw," a former hiker of about half of the AT. He lived in the area and made it his task to help hikers by putting a cooler on the trail with cold soft drinks and snacks and a note for folks to "take one and leave the remainder for other hikers." When we saw him he was retrieving his cooler and had two soft drinks, two brownies (his wife made them) and two packs of crackers and peanut butter. George and I sucked down the soft drinks and consumed the snacks. Southpaw related he didn't like to be seen by the locals bringing his cooler onto the trail or picking it up, because he had had several coolers stolen. Nevertheless he was still making his trail angel contribution. We all walked down to VA 624 and George and I went across it and hid our packs. There was a country store (The Catawba Grocery) on VA 311 less than half a mile away. Southpaw dropped us off there. George and I each had two of the most disgusting looking hot dogs I have ever seen along with some crusted over chili. The hot dogs were steamed and were a yellowish-brown. It was the only cooked food they had. I had 40 ounces of beverage and took away the same amount of water in the empty bottles, potato chips and an ice cream bar. While we were walking back to our packs and the trail, both George and I mused that we would be very lucky if we didn't get sick from the hot dogs and chili. Fortunately we did not.

Once we got to our packs we hiked another mile or so till we came to a good campsite. We tented out near a stream. We were really in a fairly populated area (that is there were farms near by and we could hear a dog barking all night) and there were "cow patties all along the bank of the stream. Consequently we thought it imprudent to use the water – despite iodine, etc. Since we had just topped off our bodies and ate, we did not cook that night and we were also filled up with water. We certainly could have drunk some and used replacement, but we did not. I might note that for a couple days we had seen signs to be careful about the water because a number of people had reported getting sick.. I slept real well and was more than ever convince of the pluses of tenting versus sleeping in shelters. George was about 50 yards away. I know he slept well too, since the few times I did wake up I could hear him snoring even in his tent at that distance.

## **2 May**

We started out at 8 a.m. and were still recovering from two tough days. We slowly climbed up Catawba Mountain and, after seven miles, took a break at the Catawba Mountain Shelter where we ran into Lumberjack and Closer. The previous day they had hitched a ride off of the trail and had restarted late in the morning. That's why they weren't way ahead of us. They had brought back and were carrying Ballpark hot dogs and buns and told us they would share with us if we got to and stayed at Lambert's Meadow Shelter that evening. From Catawba Mountain Shelter we "blue blazed" (took a route other than that blazed for the AT) for about two miles around McAfee Knob. We covered an equal distance and it was an uphill climb but easier going. We made the decision to do this reluctantly, but it was very hot, we were hurting for water, and two places in a row where we expected to find it had dried up. We had no confidence we would do better at the next place. We got back on the AT near Campbell Shelter and did find decent water there. It was a steady small flow through a rusty pipe that had been dug almost horizontally (but slightly downhill) into an almost dry looking creek bed. We then hiked along the Tinker Mountain ridgeline and had a very steep climb to Tinker Cliffs. This was a stretch of breath taking cliffs that lasted about half of a mile. I was so exhausted and, given I am a bit clumsy, there were significant

segments where I shied away from the blazed path which was right on the edge so I could be ten or more yards more positively fixed on terra firma. You could go paragliding from these cliffs.

After fifteen miles of hiking, totally exhausted, we got to Lambert's Meadow Shelter. It was a mess. Former users had left a lot of trash. We were the first ones there. George decided to sleep in the shelter and I decided to pitch my tent about 30 yards away. Lumber Jack and Closer both decided to pitch tents as did Maestro and "Wilson" who also came to this shelter for the evening. Wilson was another thru-hiker whom George had met early in his trip. There wasn't more good space for camping in the immediate area but they found it nearby, and close to the shelter's water source. After getting settled we started a fire and burned as much of the trash as would burn and, of course, the hot dogs were shared around – they were delicious and reminded us of how gross were the ones we eat the previous day at the Catawba Grocery.

One of the items in every shelter is a log book where people sign in and/or leave notes for other hikers that may follow. Some times they are quite interesting and sometimes they even provoke follow-on notes from those who read them. In this case there were several notes in the log book about a large rat that had taken domicile there. That had helped convince some of the folks to throw tents. In fact, during the early evening someone said he saw the rat. Well George decided to stay with his decision to sleep in the shelter. However, he did make provision to leave and sleep on the table in front of the shelter if need be. Normally people leave things like water bottles on the table, but this time we got the table cleared.

### 3 May

When I awoke in the morning George was getting out of his sleeping bag that was on the table in front of the shelter. He said he never saw the rat, but it made enough intimidating noises that he decided he wasn't going to contest occupancy. Also of note was that Wilson reported that he had heard something "stomping around outside his tent" during the night. He said he didn't know what it was but it "was at least a deer, and he wasn't going to go out to check." We actually woke up at dawn, which was now 6 a.m. to the accompaniment of a tremendous amount of bird singing. George, who has bird watching as one of his hobbies, explained that since the area was so dry and since we were near a good water source, it was natural that the birds would be there. In fact, hearing a lot of birds can be a good way to find water.

When we left we were flush with water, but all of mine was iodine tablet purified and I had developed a distaste for it. It looked like piss and the taste was getting to me. (Note: there is a second tablet you can use with the iodine to counter-act the lousy taste.) I had continuously tried to minimize using the iodine tablets, but saw no way to avoid it today. My distaste wouldn't keep me from drinking it, but I would enjoy it less.

I had, the previous day, decided that today would be my last day on the trail. When we got to where the AT crossed US 220 by the I-81 interchange just south of Troutville, George and I would spend the night. The next day (today) I would go to nearby Roanoke and catch a bus home. Both George and I were run down. Undoubtedly my various ailments to include, possibly, Lyme Disease for which I was treated after getting home, probably didn't help. The hike for the day was primarily downhill with a lot of little knobs to go up and down along the way. As AT hiking goes it was not real tough, but it was, again, very hot and the cumulative effort of the last several days took its toll. Less than a half mile from the 220 crossing we started to sit down for a break and a trail angel came by carrying a pack with warm orange soda. It was the same brand we saw on the trail two days earlier, and he said he had put that drink out there as well. We apparently found the last of two six packs he had put on the ridgeline. Each of us enjoyed the warm but refreshing drink, and then we trekked on to the interchange. We ran into the couple who had been hiking with their dog, Slack and Gidget, and asked how they negotiated Dragon's Tooth with the dog. Slack said she took the dogs backpack off and the dog, an experienced hiker in the mountains of New Hampshire, found its own way down by going places people couldn't go.

George and I made our first stop at a gas station and downed some Gaterade. We then tried to contact a couple of USMA grads in the area that we thought would be hosting us. This didn't work out, but while waiting for this to be determined, we went next door to a Western Sizzler. It was about 1:30 p.m. We did the all you can eat thing quite thoroughly. In addition I consumed eight large glasses of lemonade, coke, and iced tea. Since the hosting wasn't going to take place, we checked into the Econolodge immediately behind the Western Sizzler. The first order of business was for George to get his re-supply from the post office. He called and there were packages for both of us. They accepted my telephone direction to have the package for me returned to sender. It contained about three days worth of food for the possibility of a few more days of hiking. The post office was about three miles away, and after a few tries, George decided he needed to hike up there. The first two miles were additional AT miles, and then he got a lift the rest of the way there and back. When he returned, I was cleaned up and while he was cleaning up I did a load of laundry for the two of us. I had severe cramps in my fingers and arms. This had occurred a day or two previously, and they went away after a few minutes. I suspect I was still light on the electrolyte and mineral traces I needed given all the liquids that had flowed through me. We then lazed around the room for a few hours and around 7 p.m. we again went to the Western Sizzler, and again we did a very nice job of getting our money's worth on their all you can eat buffet.

#### **4 May**

George got a ride from a Trail Angel – Del Schechterly, someone who had a card to that purpose and left it in the check-in area of the motel's front desk – to the next road intersection. This kept him from re-hiking the two miles he had done while going to the post office the previous afternoon. He was on his way with plans for relatively modest mileage so that he would reach Waynesboro on 14 May. As it turned out, the level of difficulty and the trail helped him far exceed this schedule. Shortly after George left I took a taxi to the Roanoke bus station. A ticket to Springfield, VA cost me \$34 (after a 10% military retiree discount.) I hadn't really ever traveled a significant distance via Greyhound. The bus was comfortable and the trip interesting. I left at around 9:45 (30 minutes late), and, after an hour or so during which I talked with a college student married to a soldier at Fort Campbell, I switched buses in Lynchburg. This provided a direct shot, albeit with several stops, to Springfield. The bus was comfortable and had a bathroom. I had a double seat to myself but conversed off and on with a Virginia Tech student who got off in Fredricksburg, VA and later a student from Mary Washington College who was heading to her home in Cape Cod, Mass. I got to Springfield around 3:45 p.m. and took a Metro Bus to within a quarter mile of my home in Burke, VA.

This was the end of the trip except for the medical treatment I needed and the cleanup of equipment – neither needs to be addressed here.

It was really a terrific experience!! -- Stephen (The Hammer) Weisel