

A tribute to long-distance hikers: Appalachian Trail Museum

March 28, 2010

GARDNERS, Pa. — From the first tiny mention in Backpacker magazine about a decade ago, Larry Luxenberg's dream of creating a museum to spotlight the Appalachian Trail and its hikers has had as many ups and downs as the 2,178-mile footpath itself.

Buildings were too expensive, too decrepit or too remote. Support from public officials, elusive in the best of times, came and went with the economy and elections.

Still, Luxenberg soldiered on, putting one foot in front of the other, just as he did in 1980, when he completed his Georgia-to-Maine hike.

His persistence will be rewarded June 5 - National Trails Day - when the New York investment adviser pushes open the big, white door to the Appalachian Trail Museum and welcomes the public. The museum, at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, is about 15 miles from Gettysburg and two miles from the trail's halfway point.

"I never thought it would be this long, maybe just a couple of years," he said last Sunday, smiling.

"Then reality set in," Terry Wilson, the museum curator, added.

"And then we thought ... never," Luxenberg said, as he surveyed the 200-year-old grist mill that will house the ever-growing collection of artifacts, journals and photos of the AT and the folks who embrace it.

But then there's nothing easy about the nation's most famous trail, which has a total altitude gain equal to climbing Mount Everest more than 13 times.

Benton MacKaye, a forester by training, came up with the idea for a long-distance trail in 1921. The path was built by Myron Avery, a Washington lawyer and avid outdoorsman, and opened in 1938.

It wasn't until a decade later that Earl Shaffer became the first person to go from Georgia's Mount Oglethorpe to Maine's Mount Katahdin in one fell swoop. In 1965, he went north to south (to Springer Mountain, the modern-day southern terminus), becoming the first hiker to do a round trip.

Still, the AT hid in plain sight for years. Through hiking, as it is called, didn't catch on until the early 1970s, when Virginia's Ed Garvey wrote, "Appalachian Hiker," a how-to book that used his own adventure as a teaching tool.

Today, more than 10,000 people have reported hiking the trail end to end; fewer than half of those who start finish. One man, "Baltimore Jack" Tarlin, has logged eight through hikes.

The museum honors those hard-core hikers, but it is designed for those who use the trail as a weekend getaway or just love the outdoors. It will have explanatory displays, a children's area and a lounge for AT hikers to rest and share their stories with visitors.

Luxenberg hopes some exhibits will peel back the calendar to the days before fleece and Gore-Tex clothing and sports drinks and freeze-dried salmon pesto.

Shaffer was the model of simplicity, even on his third and final through hike to mark the 50th anniversary of his first one: Pith helmet, down vest, work pants, plaid shirt and work boots with the heels shaved down.

Emma "Grandma" Gatewood hiked the trail three times - all after her 67th birthday - wearing sneakers and carrying little more in her homemade rucksack than an old Army blanket and a shower curtain to ward off the rain.

Gene Espy, who became the second through-hiker in 1951, still has all his original gear (including his well-worn wool socks), some of which will be on display at the museum.

"This is huge," said Laurie Potteiger, on the staff of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the nonprofit group that oversees the trail. "It's a place to have the stories of the trail captured and told in an accessible way. Now the things we cherish most will be on display."

One project has turned 30 years' worth of Polaroid and digital snapshots of hikers passing through the ATC's headquarters in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., into a digital database.

A \$30,000 grant from the Maine-based Quimby Family Foundation has created a library of 12,779 images that will be accessible at the museum.

Another effort is the restoration of the Earl Shaffer Shelter, the only one of five lean-to structures built by the pioneer hiker to have survived. Volunteers numbered each log and hauled them out of the woods near Harrisburg, Pa., to be stored until a display space could be found. The tiny shelter will be tucked in a first-floor corner of the museum.

An architect volunteered his expertise. Professional museum curators and graphic artists are helping with displays. The Hershey Co. gave \$10,000 for the children's display. The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club is lending elbow grease to get the place shipshape for visitors.

"Once a few people pitched in, it really took off," Potteiger said.

At first, Luxenberg feared the grist mill was too remote to attract visitors. But Interstate 81 is just minutes away and the state park gets 300,000 visitors annually.

Plans call for the museum to be open on weekends in the spring and fall and daily from Memorial Day to **Labor Day**.

Although the AT Museum Society has tons of artifacts in storage, it is still seeking more. To help, e-mail info@atmuseum.org. For more information on the museum and opening day activities, go to atmuseum.org.