

Appalachian Trail Museum to open in June

Collection of artifacts will be housed at Pine Grove Furnace State Park

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GARDNERS, Pa. — The nation's most famous hiking trail will soon have a museum to house its artifacts and tell its story.

The Appalachian Trail Museum will open June 5 in a 200-year-old grist mill at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, about two hours north of Baltimore and just two miles from the halfway point of the 2,175-mile Appalachian Trail.

Potomac Appalachian Trail Club volunteers will rehabilitate the building to bring it up to code and install displays, said Larry Luxenberg, president of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society, who got the ball rolling and began collecting trail memorabilia a dozen years ago.

"We have a great collection and we think that when the doors open, artifacts will pour in," he said.

Luxenberg, a New York investment adviser who hiked the trail in 1980, said he was dubious about the location and favored something closer to Harpers Ferry, W.Va., where the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the nonprofit organization that oversees the trail, is located. But he changed his mind when he learned that the state park gets 300,000 visitors annually and is just eight miles from I-81.

More than 10,000 hikers have made the journey from Georgia to Maine (a handful hike it in the reverse), starting in early spring from Springer Mountain and ending in early fall at the northern terminus atop Mount Katahdin. Forty-one miles run through Maryland.

The highlight of the museum will be the Earl Shaffer Shelter, a tiny, three-sided lean-to that was one of about five built by the Pennsylvania man who in 1948 was the first person to hike the trail end to end. Shaffer hiked it north to south in 1965 and at the age of 79 walked south to north one final time in 1998.

Forty volunteers packed up the shelter, located outside Harrisburg, and carried it log by log from the woods to trucks to be held in storage.

Other displays will note the accomplishments of pioneers such as Ed Garvey, Gene Espy and Emma "Grandma" Gatewood, in 1955 the first woman to hike through the trail. At the age of 67, she made the trek wearing sneakers and carrying a homemade pack that held a blanket, a raincoat, and a plastic shower curtain. She repeated her hike in 1960 and three years later, at age 75, she did it once more.

But along with those hiking legends will be a running exhibit that displays the photos of about 18,000 hikers -- some who went end to end and others who walked just a section -- taken by Appalachian Trail Conservancy staff and volunteers over 30 years.

A \$30,000 grant from the Quimby Family Foundation is allowing the museum to digitize the old Polaroid photos and create a searchable data base of hikers. The opening of the museum will coincide with National Trails Day.