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New museum celebrates the Appalachian Trail

By John Hayes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Stacy Innerst /Post-Gazette

Hiking the entire Appalachian Trail -- 2,147 miles through 14 states from Georgia to Maine -- is such an arduous accomplishment, many of those who've done it continue to list the hike on their professional resumes decades later.

One thru-hiker, a former Post-Gazette copy editor and author, has never gotten over the experience and has made promotion of the footpath his life's work.

On June 5, Larry Luxenberg will celebrate the grand opening of the Appalachian Trail Museum in Gardners, Pa., north of Gettysburg. Housed in a historic former grist mill in Pine Grove Furnace State Park, the site is located within 3 miles of the trail's midpoint and billed as the only museum in the United States dedicated to hiking.

Luxenberg's fascination with the Appalachian Trail began in 1980 after he left the newspaper and Pittsburgh.

"I was in a transition point in life," he said. "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do."

Hiking the entire Appalachian Trail seemed to the young writer like "a great challenge and opportunity to be outdoors."

The adventure changed his life.

"It's a very intense experience," he said. "What I found as a thru-hiker, what kept me going, was the people I met and relationships I formed on the trail."

Some years after the adventure, Luxenberg wrote "Walking the Appalachian Trail" (Stackpole), a chronicle of the trail's history, thru-hiking culture and some of the colorful personalities who have hiked it. Twelve years ago, he founded the non-profit Appalachian Trail Museum Society and began searching for a central home for trail documents and artifacts.

The museum is located on park grounds a few hundred yards off the trail in one of the remaining structures of an iron mine and smelting plant, built in the mid-1700s at what was then a remote location on the edge of the Appalachian frontier.

The museum will occupy one floor of the former grist mill; plans exist to expand throughout the building. The centerpiece installation is a reassembled trail shelter hand built from tree limbs by Earl Shaffer, the writer and naturalist from York, Pa., who in 1948 became the first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail in one continuous trip. Panels relocated from the Smithsonian Institution, documents, exhibits and interactive computer portals will honor other pioneer thru-hikers, trace the trail's history and keep up with its current use. Luxenberg said a hiker's lounge near the door will enable trail users to become a sort of "living history" exhibit.

But volunteer coordinator Margi Smith said it isn't all about going the distance.

"Thru-hikers get a lot of attention because it's a really impressive thing they do," she said. "But there are thousands of people who use the trail on weekends and for day hikes, so I don't want to make it sound like it's all about the thru-hikers."

Much of the work preparing the museum has been done by for free by trail boosters.

"What's cool about this is it's pretty much a volunteer organization," she said. "Once the door opens, it's going to be staffed by volunteers. I've met so many people in the last couple of months. They're really an interesting group. I think that's the backbone of the trail, the people."

The grand opening will start at 8 a.m. Saturday with a pre-opening Hike to History -- a 6-mile walk from King's Gap Environmental Education Center near Carlisle to the museum. At 11 a.m., the museum will open with a program of speakers and activities for kids.

Trail maintenance will resume June 6 when the Cumberland Valley Appalachian Trail Club and Mountain Club of Maryland perform tasks near the Alex Kennedy shelter. The York Hiking Club will clear brush on Peters Mountain.

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10150/1061527-140.stm#ixzz0pbdoo4JR>

Where to go ... Pine Grove Furnace State Park

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10150/1061504-140.stm#ixzz0pbf3R9eB>

Pine Grove Furnace State Park



- **What to do:** Stone remnants of the giant iron smelting furnace and work site surrounding it are explained in interpretive plaques. The 700-acre park hosts a section of the Appalachian Trail and the new Appalachian Trail Museum, and is located within Michaux State Forest. Two mountain lakes include swimming areas and provide opportunities for fishing and electric-motor boating. Campers have access to 70 tent and trailer sites; picnickers choose from dozens of picnic tables and two first-come-first-served pavilions. The park is located within an easy drive to Gettysburg National Military Park.

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