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Put on walking shoes for Appalachian Trail Museum's grand opening

MARY BEILER *For The York Dispatch*

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Many people have attempted to hike the Appalachian Trail, but only a few have managed to travel the entire length from Georgia to Maine.

Earl Shaffer of York County was the first person to complete a thru-hike of the entire trail, which means he walked from one end to the other in one season in 1948. His story will be one of many featured in the Appalachian Trail Museum, set to open next weekend.

Hiking 2,179 miles -- often over rugged, mountainous terrain that crosses 14 states -- takes about six months trail experts say. Shaffer did it in four.

Since Shaffer's historic walkabout, roughly 10,000 hikers have traveled the trail end to end since it opened in 1937.

A shelter that Shaffer built on the trail is one of the artifacts that will be on display at the museum, located in a 200-year-old renovated grist mill in Pine Grove Furnace State Park.

Volunteers carefully dismantled and labeled each of the shelter's 61 logs. They were then transported to a barn where they were treated for insects before being put back together at the museum.

A native Pennsylvanian, Shaffer went on to hike the entire trail again in 1965 and 1998. He undertook his 1998 journey when he was 79 years old.

Artifacts preserved: Larry Luxenberg is president and founder of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society, a non-profit organization that was formed in 2002 to lead efforts to establish the museum. Luxenberg, who hiked the entire trail in 1980, said the purpose of the museum was to preserve artifacts of pioneer hikers.

"A lot of the artifacts were in danger of being lost," he said. "We want to be able to tell the story of the trail."

And there are many stories to be told. Not just the building and preserving the trail itself, but the stories of the hikers who have taken on the challenge.

Hiking the trail is mentally and physically challenging, but it is that challenge that draws hikers to it, Luxenberg said.

"It's a chance to withdraw from life (and be) out in the beauty of nature," he said.

Middle of the road: The museum's location -- just two miles from the mid-point of the trail -- is a place where visitors and hikers themselves can reflect on the history and journey of the trail.

Hikers from near and far will be able to reflect on the history of the trail during the grand opening festivities for the museum.

A "Hike to History" -- a six-mile hike from Kings Gap to Pine Grove Furnace State Park -- will start at 7:45 a.m. at Kings Gap and end at the museum at 11 a.m. in time for the start of the grand opening activities.

The hike is expected to be very popular, so pre-registration is required and there is a fee of \$35 per hiker. The last day to register is May 28.

The Hike to History fee includes a light breakfast, preferred sitting at the museum opening, and a special edition of the Appalachian Trail Museum commemorative patch.

Other hikes -- ranging in distance from 8.5 miles to 16 miles -- are planned throughout the weekend, as well as trail maintenance outings.

Getting the museum in order and bringing the artifacts to life took a lot of time and energy, Luxenberg said.

"It's been a long time coming, but it's great to see it come to fruition," Luxenberg said.

Trail blazers

The grand opening of the Appalachian Trail museum is set for June 5. Plenty of activities are planned to celebrate the history and artifacts of the trail, including a "Hike to History," trail maintenance outings, and stories told by hikers of the trail themselves.

The museum is located in an old grist mill in Pine Grove Furnace State Park. Space is limited on the hikes, so reservations are recommended. Reservations can be made with Karen Balaban of the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club at KMBalaban@BalabanLLC.com or 717-232-3708.

To register for the "Hike to History," go to <http://sites.google.com/site/hiketohistory/home>.