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Hikers hall of fame? New Appalachian Trail Museum opens in Pennsylvania



In 1921, Benton MacKaye had an extraordinary idea. Convinced that modern life was undermining people's ability to connect with nature, the forester and land conservation pioneer proposed a massive walking trail from Maine to Georgia that would keep that wild bond intact. "Here is a job for 40,000 souls," he wrote in an article pitching the idea of an Appalachian Trail. By 1937, the foot trail that's now 2,178 miles long was finished.

Today volunteers, hiking clubs and some government agencies continue to work to preserve and manage the trail envisioned by MacKaye, which thousands trod annually. And on Saturday, National Trails Day, the trail's story will be told in a new museum in south-central Pennsylvania that was again completed by dedicated volunteers.

The Appalachian Trail Museum officially opens at 11 a.m. with a ceremony and programs throughout the day at its home inside a 200-year-old grist mill at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, two miles from the midpoint of the trail. Exhibits include thousands of pictures of hikers as well as features that tell the story of the founding and construction of the trail and those who first hiked it.

Gene Espy, who in 1951 became the second person to through-hike the trail, will attend as well as a daughter of Grandma Gatewood, who became the first solo woman to complete the trail at the age of 67 in 1955 (she later became the first person to hike the trail more than once).

The museum is free and open noon to 4 p.m. daily through Labor Day and weekends from Labor Day to Oct. 31. Contact: Appalachian Trail Museum Society

—Mary Forgione, Los Angeles Times Daily Travel & Deal blogger

Photo: The new Appalachian Trail Museum opens Saturday inside a 200-year-old grist mill in south-central Pennsylvania. Credit: Robert T. Kinsey, courtesy of www.millpictures.com