

New Appalachian Trail Museum puts focus on the late Earl Shaffer

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Larry Luxenberg, the president and founder of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society, left, and board member Joe Patterson discuss the work being done on the museum recently. The museum, which opens Saturday, will feature a shelter, right, that was originally built by William Penn graduate Earl Shaffer, the trail's first thru-hiker. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Kate Penn)

GARDNERS -- Waves of pride and even some sadness will wash over John Shaffer when he comes home for the opening of the Appalachian Trail Museum.

It is the only museum in the United State dedicated to hiking, and it's being housed in a renovated 200-year-old grist mill in Pine Grove Furnace State Park.

It's only a couple of miles from the midpoint of 2,179-mile trail.

And Shaffer's brother, Earl, a William Penn graduate, will be the centerpiece of it all.

John Shaffer, who's now 82 and lives in Ohio, plans to be at the museum's opening ceremony on Saturday. He and Earl, who died in 2002, grew up on a truck farm in Shiloh.

Certainly, the memories will rush back this weekend -- all of the things accomplished as well as all of things left undone, like a lot of Earl's poetry and his unidentified photographs of the trail.

One of the trail shelters Earl built is the museum's feature exhibit.

"I think he would have liked that the shelter was saved and put on display," his brother said.

"I wish he was still here."

The museum will tell the stories of the founding, construction, preservation and maintenance of the trail since its inception in the 1920s and completion in 1937. It also will be a meeting place for thru-hikers.

And no one is more of a trail icon than Earl Shaffer.

He was the first person to hike its entirety in one journey, when he went from Georgia to Maine in 1948. He also hiked the trail, north to south, in 1965.

He gained national publicity in 1998 when he hiked it all one more time, from Springer Mountain to Mount Katahdin as he closed in on his 80th birthday.

Over the years, Shaffer built several three-sided shelters along the trail for overnight hikers. The last one in good condition, located on Peter's Mountain north of Harrisburg, was carefully taken apart by volunteers in 1998, stored and re-assembled recently in the new museum.

Also on display will be military pith helmets Shaffer used on his hikes



Louise Sis of New Cumberland, a member of the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club, puts in a window screen at the new Appalachian Trail Museum at Pine Grove Furnace State Park. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Kate Penn)

and a recent exhibit about him from the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History.

Four busts carved out of black walnut will rest on the museum's fireplace mantel: trail founder Benton MacKaye, legendary thru-hikers Baltimore Jack and Grandma Gatewood -- and, of course, Shaffer.

"Earl was a very unassuming sort of person," his brother said. "He really didn't seek publicity but publicity ended up seeking him.

"To me he was my brother and probably, we expected the least from him," he said with a laugh. "He never married. He was almost a hermit."

But he loved the outdoors and he loved the trail, just about single-handedly re-locating 60 miles of it himself.

The preserved shelter was built of 61 chestnut logs around 1960.

"Earl was pivotal in the trail (because of hiking it) ... but he also was involved in the trail for 50 years as a volunteer and being around the hikers," said Larry Luxenberg, president and founder of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society.

"We wanted to get across in the museum that part of the special character of the trail is that it was built and largely maintained by volunteers."

Others featured in the museum include Gene Espy, who became the second person to hike the entire trail in one trip in 1951, and Gatewood, who was the first woman to thru-hike in 1955 at 67 and later became the first person to hike it more than once.



George Freet of York Township, right, wipes her brow while removing sod with volunteer coordinator Margy Schmidt at the Appalachian Trail Museum in Pine Grove Furnace State Park. The museum opens Saturday. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Kate Penn)

But the most famous hiker is from York County.

Now, all those years later, his brother still remembers Earl reading the magazine article that spurred him, as a kid, to hike the entire trail.

He remembers dropping Earl off on the trail when he stopped home during that 1948 thru-hike.

Remembers spending three weeks with him in the Maine wilderness to help him finish the final time a dozen years ago.

Now, he will be come back to see the museum, something that he's convinced his sometimes-famous, sometimes-ornery brother would have enjoyed.

"It's going to be an emotional thing," John Shaffer said, choking up a bit on his words.

Surely, the handshakes and hugs will find him on Saturday, people asking him to tell the stories of the legend as only he can.

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