

# She Hiked North On The Trail Of Self-Discovery

By KAREN OLSON  
Special To The Observer

There are things in life you just have to do.

Last year, I had to hike the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine — 2,000-plus miles of mountain paths, cow pastures, old dirt roads, aching muscles and dreams come true.

The dreams started when I was a kid in East Tennessee, hunting for arrowheads and exploring limestone caves and chasing rabbits in the woods. As I grew older, the dreams were muffled by school and jobs.

Then, in May 1977, I took a nine-day course at the N.C. Outward Bound School near Linville Gorge — a wilderness program that teaches people to survive in the outdoors, to do things they didn't think possible. After that, my Appalachian Trail dreams returned.

I was looking for a sane way to live. On the Trail, I thought, there would be no interruptions — no alarm clocks or traffic lights, no distinctions between working time and leisure time. There would be nothing but the basics: food, water, warmth, friends and freedom.

So I quit my job at The Observer and, April 25, started walking on Springer Mountain in Georgia. I followed the Trail until Oct. 22, when I finished in Maine.

I found what I was looking for — and much more.

I found that other people shared my yearnings. Everybody I met on the Trail was somebody I wanted to talk with, and it didn't take long to talk about things that counted. We formed an off-and-on nomadic community.

It didn't take long to love each other and depend on each other and take responsibility for each other. In New Jersey, we set up camp for a hiker who was too sick to walk. In Vermont, we fetched food for a Boy Scout group that had run short. In Erwin, Tenn., we bailed out a

fellow hiker who spent the night in jail for public drunkenness. We felt like neighbors, sisters, brothers, doctors and rescue squads.

We lived outside five or six days out of seven. We rose at sunrise, slept at sunset, ate all we could and walked until we felt pleasantly spent.

On a typical day, I walked 10 hours, slept 10 hours and ate 4 hours; I usually covered 12-15 miles. I looked for water all the time; I always found it, and it always tasted good. I slept very soundly.

Nothing was ever worth worrying about. How could it be, when I'd nearly cracked my head open the day before, and had slept blissfully late that morning, and would pass by a grocery store the next day where I could guzzle a gallon of orange juice?

I lived sunrise to sunrise and surprise to surprise. In some respects, life was rhythmic and soothing: I always knew what I'd wear and what I'd eat and what possessions I carried on my back. On the other hand, I never knew when a Canadian jay might swoop down on my sandwich, or a snake might slither across my path or a friend I hadn't seen in 600 miles might catch up with me.

Peaceful weeks would speed by like streaks of amber sunshine.

And then, a peak experience would force the whole world to a sudden, silent stop.

One afternoon, for example, I watched glittery indigo dragonflies with beaks like parakeets playing on a New Hampshire lake. I fell into some prehistoric dream of tree-sized ferns and giant insects, and I woke feeling as if millions of years had passed me by in five minutes.

Time and again, circumstances told me the Trail was the right place for me to be:

• On a drizzly day in Virginia, a woman asked me into her house for a

See SHE, Page 10E Col. 1







The Appalachian Trail winds north through parks and woods, such as the evergreen forests (left) of Vermont's Green Mountains.



# Open A Letter And You C

The name fairly leaped from the corner of the brown envelope in the stack of letters. Bernard Dekle. A ghost from the past.

I had known only one Bernard Dekle in my life. It had to be him.

Tokyo, 1961. I was a Pfc., U.S. Army, in danger of losing that exalted rank. I was a 701.11, information specialist trained in psychological warfare. In that position I mostly had driven jeeps, swept floors and painted 2½-ton trucks.

I was not a good boy. As punishment, I had been sent from my permanent station in Okinawa to work with civilians in Tokyo. It was a classic case of throwing Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. Because I was an information



**Jerry Bledsoe**

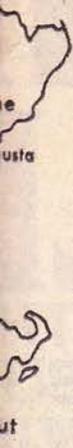
specialist, I was assigned as a writer to the staff of a Korean language magazine called "Friends of Freedom." It was a propaganda magazine published by the U.S. government. Its circulation in South Korea was second only to a movie magazine, mainly because it was free.

My experience as a writer was somewhat limited. I had never

written anything. I had flunked high school English because of my reluctance to write term papers and book reports. At 18, I had joined the Army and, because scores I received on some tests had been sent off to Information School, where the Army spent months teaching me the rudiments of writing simple news stories, radio scripts and speeches before assigning me to perpetual KP and guard duty.

It was with no little trepidation then, that on my first day in Tokyo I faced the editor of "Friends of Freedom," Bernard Dekle. He was white-haired and a bit disheveled, with a warm smile and a touch of absent-mindedness. I liked him immediately. I

Last April, Karen Olson began walking the 2,045-mile Appalachian Trail, an adventure that by September found her hiking along the ridges of New Hampshire's White Mountains (above), a cool contrast to the scorching June afternoon when she and fellow hikers crossed the Tye River in Virginia (below). She followed the trail from Springer Mountain in Georgia to its end on Mount Katahdin in Maine, where she arrived Oct. 22.



# en A Flood Of Memories

at home with him when I ed he had been a newspa- man in North Carolina, first for Observer in '40 and '41. s credentials were impressive. ng WWII, he served with the ce of War Information in e, in Rome, and in Austria in burg and Vienna. He was in- ation adviser to Gen. Douglas arthur during the occupation an. He had remained with S. Information Agency. y first assignment was to e a profile of Secretary of Dean Rusk. When I finished, ried it into Dekle's glass-en- d office and returned to my to watch nervously as he read e came out smiling, carrying manuscript. "Damn," he said,

"they finally have sent me a writer."

I was as surprised as he was. I glowed as he painstakingly ripped apart my purple prose and showed me how the material could be molded into a readable story. He began by pointing out that I probably should not begin a story about Dean Rusk with a vivid description of a Korean sunset.

During the next six months, Deke showed infinite patience in his attempt to teach me the basics of good writing. He gave me a little book called "The Elements of Style" by Wilbur Strunk and E.B. White, and I have never since had it far away.

One of my proudest days was

when I was able to deliver to Dekle a story he saw no need to change. He rewarded me by letting me read the manuscript of a novel he'd been working on for years. When I left Tokyo, I carried with me a damning and lasting infection — a desire to continue writing. It is all Dekle's fault.

After I got out of the Army, I See LETTER, Page 9E Col. 1

**Peter Weaver's Series On Taxes Is On Page 2E Today**

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# She Hiked North On Th

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cup of hot tea. She turned out to be Gayle Stoner, an Outward Bound instructor and the cousin of a girlhood friend.

• I passed a Civil War grave in Tennessee and two hours later bumped onto a farm where I met three of the dead man's descendants.

• With eight other hikers, I waited out a hailstorm in a covered bridge near Newport, Va. Three months and 1,100 miles later, seven of that original nine found ourselves sitting out a vicious sleet storm together in a New Hampshire hut.

• I met a wonderful guy, a New Hampshire carpenter, whom I hiked with for 900 miles. I never before had been able to enjoy hiking with another person for any length of time.

• I saw the Atlantic Ocean, gleaming on the horizon 70 miles away, from the top of Mount Washington, N.H. It's visible there only six or seven times a year.

• I walked into the little village of Tyringham, Mass., out of food and hoping to find a grocery store. There wasn't one, but the town's only church was having a bake

sale, so I was able to load up on brownies and nut breads.

In short, life on the Trail made sense. It worked, it was whole, and it was wonderful.

There was lots of everyday magic — birds that ate from my hand and raccoons that ate from my pack, a doe that nursed twin fawns in a Pennsylvania graveyard, a cherry tree that practically threw fruit into my mouth as I splashed in Virginia's Tye River.

There was my first moose and my seventh moose and the bear that ambled down the streets of Monson, Maine. There was the solar-powered outhouse in New Hampshire (outhouses have to have a certain amount of heat to work in winter), the abortive frog hunt in Virginia, and the mile-long wriggle over and under and between a series of giant boulders, pulling my pack behind me because the space was too cramped to wear it.

I stayed in a monastery in New York, baked brownies in an abandoned cabin in Maine, explored tumbledown tunnels where the water used to flow into a pulp mill in West Virginia.

The Trail was a time machine sorts. It followed old stagecoach roads and railroad beds and the C&O Canal tow path along the Potomac River. It passed abandoned villages, hermits' graves and a monument to a man who made 2,000-pound cheese in Cheshire, Mass., in 1803.

## Extraordinary Hospitality

It was populated by "ordinary" people who offered extraordinary hospitality. A Virginia couple drove me 20 miles out of the way for ice cream. A Maryland chimney sweep asked me in for hamburgers. A Pennsylvania homemaker fed me zucchini casserole.

I met scientists chasing gypsy moths, Army rangers in training, kilt-clad Scottophiles, the assistant conductor of the Boston Pops, two Vermont veterinarians, a squirrel hunter and a wild turkey hunter. New Hampshire goose farmer and a mad bicyclist pedaling from Indiana to Florida.

They all asked me how I found time to hike the Trail and how I was lucky enough to have the good experiences I did.

I didn't know what to tell them. I felt like saying, "Ask and I

## Has Hiking Bug Bit You? Here's Where You Start

Want to hike on the Appalachian Trail? Many of the most beautiful stretches are in North Carolina.

You can get maps, guidebooks and general information from backpacking stores or by writing the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC), Box 236, Harpers Ferry, W.Va. 25425. If you join the non-profit ATC for \$12.50, you'll get discounts on a number of trail guides and backpacking books, and monthly newsletters on trail conditions.

The Trail passes through 14 states, two national parks, eight national forests, two national recreation areas, one national historic park and dozens of state parks.

It's marked by white paint marks on trees. In places, it's very well-maintained. In other places, it's almost nonexistent. You can get details from the ATC, a hiking club, a backpacking store or park rangers.

The first mile of the Appalachian Trail was cut in 1922; the footpath was completed in 1937. Nobody knows exactly how long the Trail is, since the 66 affiliated hiking clubs relocate portions periodically.

Right now, the Trail is officially 2,045.9 miles. "That could change tomorrow," says Jean Cashin, the ATC's director of user services.

The Trail's popularity increases each year. Before 1968, no more

than four people had hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in one year. The ATC knows of six hikers who completed it in 1970, 23 in 1971, 33 in 1972, 74 in 1973, 45 in 1974, 56 in 1975 and 100 in 1976. This does not include hikers who completed the Trail in pieces over a period of years.

Complete figures have not been compiled for 1977 and 1978. ATC staffers estimate that 140 people hiked the whole Trail in 1978. About 1,500 started at Springer Mountain, Ga., in spring 1978 intending to finish the Trail in one season; 17 started at Katahdin, the northern terminus.

The journals of 46 people who have hiked the whole trail are recorded in "Hiking the Appalachian Trail," edited by James Hare (Roda, \$39.95); the two-volume set is available at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public library.

Other books are: "Appalachian Odyssey: Walking the Trail from Georgia to Maine" by Steve Sherman and Julia Older (Greene, \$10.50 and \$6.95); "Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime" by Edward Garvey (Appalachian Books, \$6.50); "The Appalachian Trail" by Ronald M. Fisher (National Geographic, \$5.75); "Appalachian Trail: Wilderness on the Doorstep," by Ann and Myron Sutton (Lippincott \$9.95 and \$3.95).

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# The Trail Of Self-Discovery

shall receive. Seek and ye shall find." I only knew that everything I needed came to me when I needed it: a ride to a grocery store, an encouraging letter from home sent to a pre-arranged address, a new pair of shorts, a \$10 bill, a place to sleep.

The world was home. I slept under my poncho and under bridges, in shelters and fire stations and gazebos and barns and private homes, in a firetower and a child's treehouse and an abandoned hunting camp, in homey rooming houses and cheap motels. I stayed in dormitories at Dartmouth and Williams colleges. I spent the night with a Maine hermit, a New York City weatherman and the postmistress of Allen, Pa.

In New Hampshire, I cleaned an oven for my keep. In Maine, I babysat in return for a bath and a mattress in the barn. I felt like I lived a charmed life.

## All, All Alone

That isn't to say there weren't dangers on the Trail. They came elter-skelter, as they do in cities.

One night, alone in Windsor Furnace, Pa., I pondered the journey's devastating lows: the Michigan

man I knew who had been bitten by a black widow spider, the young woman who had contracted Rocky Mountain spotted fever from a tick bite, the other woman who had been stabbed while hiking through a New York state park.

I myself had been scared witless many times, including two instances when I was sure I was about to be struck by lightning. That day at Windsor Furnace, I had walked in 95-degree heat and tongue-swelling thirst over sharp, scorching rocks. I felt a deep, empty hole inside myself, an aching loneliness.

I cried and brooded and finally accepted the fact that I was alone. I concluded I needed the bad to appreciate the good. So long as life went well, I realized, I had never asked myself why I wanted to hike the Trail; I had never truly appreciated the advantages of life in the woods.

I mused some more and decided the world's biggest problem is insincerity. It seemed to me that people couldn't communicate with or appreciate each other unless they communicated with and appreciated themselves, and that they

couldn't appreciate themselves unless they spent time alone with themselves.

The Trail was a way to be alone and a way to be with others and a way to live the heart of human experiences.

## Shell-Shedding

I shed many shells, like a crawdad. Crawdads, another hiker explained to me as we sat beside a creek in Virginia, have glands that soften their armor when the body grows too large to fit inside. "I want a gland like that, too," I said.

The toughest part of my six-month summer was leaving the Trail. City life slapped me in the soul with its funny-tasting water and funny-smelling air and people who jump up from pleasant conversations because their lunch hours are finished. I kept forgetting that toilets flush and water faucets need to be turned off and spoons are not the only eating utensils.

But one day I walked around the block in the rain, and I knew I'd be OK. After all, the Trail was not a squiggly line on a map or a series of white paint marks on trees. The Trail is a way of life.

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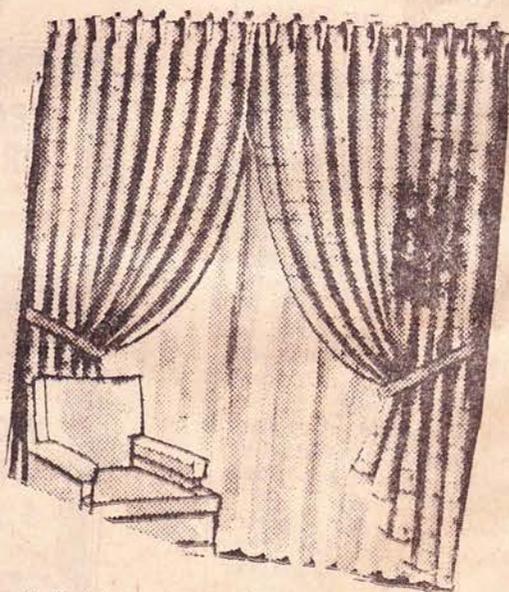
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Photos By KAREN OLSON

Father Henry welcomes hiker Don Phillips of Connecticut to Graymoor Monastery in Graymoor, N.Y.



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Hungry and out of food, Karen Olson happened upon a church bake sale in Tyringham, Mass., just in time to stock up on enough brownies and cakes from these four women to sustain a few days' more hiking.