

Excerpts from a Forthcoming Biography of Earl Shaffer

By David Donaldson and Maurice Forrester

Preface

The reputation of Earl Shaffer, although well established within the hiking community, has only infrequently crossed paths with the larger world. One of those rare intersections occurred in 1998 when, at the age of 79, he walked for the third time the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in a single trip — a distance of more than 2,000 miles. On that most recent occasion, as he moved north from Georgia toward his destination at Mount Katahdin in Maine, he was bedeviled by representatives of the media who became increasingly persistent and numerous as he neared his goal. Earl himself was alternately flattered and annoyed by this unwonted attention.

In 1948 he had become the first person known to have hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in a single trip. Fifty years later he became the oldest person to have performed this feat. In 1965, between those two hikes, he made the hike from north to south. In the pantheon of noteworthy trail people Earl Shaffer's position is secure. He ranks with those other legendary trail personages: Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery. MacKaye gave birth to the concept; Avery took the concept and built a trail from it; and Shaffer demonstrated the potential of the finished product.

Between hikes Earl built trails and trail shelters (sometimes single-handedly), and he helped found a hiking club and establish a statewide hiking federation. On behalf of the Appalachian Trail Conference he responded to requests for advice from novice hikers.

Primarily though, he thought of himself as a writer. Although his best known book is *Walking With Spring*, a prose hiking memoir, his preferred medium was verse. As a poet he believed himself unappreciated, a belief that has some merit. His poetic output was immense but uneven, the published portion being only a small fraction of the whole. A selection of the best of his poetry would make a volume of respectable size and quality. Such a book has yet to be published.

Early in June 1948, shortly after passing the midpoint of his walk from Georgia to Maine, Earl Shaffer paused at a trail register to read what previous hikers had written. He was particularly struck by some lines of verse that an enthusiastic hiker had quoted from the poem "The Outland Trails," by the American poet Henry Herbert Knibbs.

*Sun and wind and the sound of rain! Hunger and thirst and strife!
God! To be out on the trails again with a grip on the mane of life!*

It is easy to see why Earl was attracted to these lines, both as poetry and philosophy. From beginning to end he had a firm grip on life's mane even when the ride was rougher than he might have wished.

Derry Creek

The Shaffer boys—being boys—quite naturally made endless use of Derry Creek, which flowed through the back of the property to which they had moved. At that time the creek had a small dam, and the water was deep enough to allow the boys to swim in it. They could also paddle around in a canoe that Earl built. The creek was home to a variety of creatures: fish, muskrats, crayfish, pollywogs, frogs, and even an occasional snapping turtle or two. There were also a lot of eels in the early years. Although the Shaffers did not harvest them, other people did, working at night and using flashlights and a harpoon-like device described by John as being “like a long fork.”

Although there have been no muskrats in the creek for many years, they were abundant back when the Shaffer boys were young. Those animals they trapped, using steel traps which they would set near the animal's hole or near a slide or at a place where it was apparent that they went to feed on vegetation. Then the boys skinned the animal and sold the fur to a fur dealer who would come around periodically. Later when the dealer's son was about 14 or 15 and had begun to drive a car, his father would send him out to buy the furs. The price fluctuated from a low of 30 cents per hide up to a high of \$1.25. Usually the price was in the lower range. Earl remembered that he got 45 cents for his very first muskrat pelt. After skinning the animal the skin was stretched but not tanned since the purchaser generally wanted to do the tanning his way.

Occasionally the muskrat's dark red meat was eaten. This once provided the setting for a practical joke on Aunt Minnie, a relative who would come to visit once or twice a year. They served her muskrat for a meal during one visit, but without telling her what it was. She assumed that she was eating rabbit, and proclaimed it the best rabbit she had ever eaten. The Shaffer boys were convinced that if she were told what she was actually eating, she would have had a heart attack and died on the spot.

The Pearl

Earl decided that he wanted a pearl as a souvenir of his time in the islands. Before heading to Tongareva, just below the equator, the most remote and largest atoll of the 15 Cook Islands, he bought a ukulele for seven dollars. The ukulele was made out of coconuts, and Earl knew that where he was going it would be worth a lot more than he paid for it. He was taking it to trade for a pearl.

He hung the ukulele on the corner of his mosquito bar in plain sight as bait. Before long Johnny Ford, a native who spoke pretty good English, came by. Johnny could sing in the chanting native style. He was only a fair singer, but a skillful ukulele player. He stopped beside the instrument on display and, pointing at the ukulele, asked, “How much?”

Earl replied, "I want a pearl, Johnny." On three or four separate occasions this exchange was repeated until finally Johnny said, "I get you pearl."

Johnny then took Earl down to the local village. Earl had to get a special pass because the village was fenced off to keep the Americans away from the native girls. Johnny then took Earl to meet his brother, a pearl diver, who had a white pearl—his prize possession. The pearl was kept at the bottom of a locked blanket chest. Johnny and his brother conversed for a while in the native Polynesian language. The brother then nodded his head and reached for his little ditty bag, such as was worn around the neck by all the local men. From the bag he extracted a key with which he unlocked the blanket chest. From the chest he withdrew a ball of cloth which he unfolded to reveal the pearl. "And it was the size of a small pea," Earl said, "pretty good size for a pearl, a genuine pearl. So he laid it on my hand."

The pearl divers normally sold their finds to dealers who paid a flat rate per pearl, regardless of size or quality. The going rate at that time, according to Earl, was about ten dollars per pearl. If a diver came up with a specimen he believed to be particularly valuable, he would hold it out and wait for an opportunity to sell it at a better price. Earl asked, "How much, Johnny?" The reply was. "Ukulele and twenty dollar." So Johnny got the ukulele and his brother got the \$20—roughly double what he would have gotten from a dealer.

For almost three years Earl carried the pearl all over the pacific in his wallet because he was afraid to run the risk of mailing it home.

Mr. Handy

Throughout his hike Earl's chance encounters with local people provided as much mental and emotional nourishment as did the wonders of the natural world through which he stepped. An example is a family he came upon somewhere in the vicinity of the Blue Ridge Parkway in southwestern Virginia.

One day while trying to make progress against a fierce headwind that had come up, Earl noticed a farmer who was plowing his field with a team of two mules and a horse. The man saw Earl and waved; then, stopping his team midway along in the furrow, he walked over to the fence to talk. This in itself was an unusual act by any farmer in the midst of his spring plowing. The man identified himself as Handy -- no first name given. "I ain't got no eddication," Mr. Handy stated, "that's why I'm followin' the plow, but I like to talk to everyone as sensible as I can." He owned 200 acres of farmland and 100 acres of pasture; he also rented additional land that he worked. After starting from scratch, he had eventually built a large new house to replace the tiny cabin in which he and his wife had started out. He invited Earl to join him for his noon meal. Even though his wife was in the hospital for an operation, his "girl" was coming over from her place "to fix a little somethin'." Although Earl would ordinarily have declined such in

invitation in the interest of time, this case, he felt, was somehow different so he accepted.

As the farmer finished plowing the interrupted furrow, and headed toward the far end of the field, Earl walked along and talked about his own work on farms as a boy, including some "walk-plowing." When they neared the fencerow Earl noticed a young man moving around aimlessly as though unable to keep still. "That's my boy," Mr Handy said, "got throwed in the war," by which he meant the boy was shellshocked. The farmer had recently brought him home from the Veterans Hospital in hopes that the familiar surroundings might help improve his condition. "Maybe it'll do him good if you talk to him," he said to Earl. When the farmer introduced the two, however, the boy scarcely seemed to notice, clutching the back of his neck as though from pain or numbness.

When the team was unhitched, Mr. Handy instructed his son to take the horse to the barn and feed it while the farmer himself tended to the mules. Walking along with the boy and the horse toward the barn, Earl asked how old the horse was. In a voice that was barely above a whisper the boy said, "Two year." Those were the only words Earl ever heard the boy speak. In the barn after the horse was fed and they were waiting for Mr. Handy to come up with a hay cart, Earl was startled when the boy took off his corduroy cap and put it on Earl's uncovered head. Earl retrieved his rain hat from his pack and, in turn, put it on the boy's head. "That made him laugh a little," Earl later wrote.

They quickly unloaded the hay and hurried to the house to beat an approaching rain squall. Inside they found that Mr. Handy's daughter had indeed fixed "a little somethin'." The meal included fried ham, spoon gravy (made from the fryings), stewed apples, goat's milk, and real southern cornbread, "the kind that is broken, not sliced."

Earl and Mr. Handy talked for at least an hour and Earl was invited to stay for the night "or a week for that matter." Earl firmly declined, observing that spring was steadily moving north and he was committed to going along. Mr. Handy agreed, but it still took another hour for Earl to get away.

As he resumed his hike, Earl mused to himself that for a man whose wife was in the hospital for an operation, and whose son was almost hopelessly shellshocked, Mr Handy was remarkably cheerful.

A Bear and a Bug

It was October when Earl finished his 1965 hike, and the nights in the Georgia mountains were turning cold. Earl's brother John and sister Anna had decided to drive down to Georgia to meet Earl at the finish and bring him back home to Pennsylvania. They knew approximately when Earl expected to get to the end, so allowing themselves some leeway, John took time off from his job and they set off on a Tuesday in John's VW

Bug, driving directly to Amicalola Falls State Park, the main trail portal to Springer Mountain.

They saw nothing of Earl, so they wandered around asking everyone they encountered if they had seen an Appalachian Trail through-hiker in the area. No one had. Next John and Anna drove to another road crossing farther north to enquire for their errant brother. With no luck so far, and with darkness falling, they finally made use of the sleeping bags they had brought with them and slept directly on the trail. In the morning there was ice on a nearby pond.

Early that day they finally met someone who believed that he had seen a hiker fitting Earl's description who had passed through a day or two before. With this encouraging news John and Anna headed back to Amicalola Falls State Park to wait. They calculated that Earl might be still a day's trek away. While at the park they met and talked with the Park Superintendent who after making some phone calls determined about where Earl was last seen — a good day's hike away. That night John and Anna accepted the Superintendent's offer to let them stay in one of the camp's lodges.

The following day they drove to a road crossing that was only about a mile from the Park where they settled down to wait. The hours went by and eventually dusk began to fall with still no sign of Earl. John was under very rigid time constraints regarding when he had to get back to his job. He finally set a specific time and told Anna that if Earl did not turn up by then they would have to go home without him.

As the darkness continued to thicken, Anna found herself worrying about bears as was often the case when she was in the woods. Suddenly she saw a lumbering creature coming out from among the trees. Turning to her brother she said, "Johnny, I think there's a bear down there." John looked in the direction she was pointing and replied, "No, that's Earl."

After the initial greetings, John quickly informed his brother that they had to head home right away so that John could get to an important sales meeting the next day. Earl, however, refused to leave until he walked the remaining mile and signed the register. John finally agreed to wait until Earl could complete the final mile and sign the register, but insisted on walking along with his brother because he thought Earl seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Taking flashlights along, the two walked to the end of the trail and then back again. Earl had originally planned to continue hiking the old trail from Springer to Oglethorpe, but in view of John's urgency and the fact that Springer was now the official southern terminus, he agreed to forgo the additional hiking.

In the meantime Anna remained alone with John's VW Bug and her concern about bears. At one point — perhaps to stretch her legs — she decided to get out of the car for a while. Anna was very uneasy alone at the edge of a bear infested forest so she kept the key in the ignition for a fast getaway if she were attacked. According to John, his sister

was obsessed with keeping doors locked. Consequently when she got out of the car, she automatically locked the door, forgetting the her only key was still in the ignition.

Fortunately John and Earl shortly returned to alleviate their sister's fear, but they were then confronted with the problem of gaining access to their only means of getting home, since John did not have a spare key. Happily, the Bug had a cloth roof. (John later commented jokingly that "the roof was worth almost more than the car." Using Earl's pocket knife they cut a slit in the roof. Then, using as a tool a small twig that they whittled down to the necessary size and shape, they finally managed to get the door open.

The three of them were all dead tired; Earl after a long day's hiking; John and Anna after many hours of anxious, sleepless waiting. Finally, for whatever reason, it was decided that the driving would be done by Earl who, incidentally, had never driven a VW Bug before. After an uneasy and briefly dangerous start, things settled down and they all got home. John was a little late for his meeting, but at least he was in one piece.

On the first day of his north-to-south hike Earl saw a mother bear with her cub, and on the last day he was himself mistaken for a bear by his own sister.

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