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# Yogi-ing Purists, Trail Magic and Men in Skirts: An Analysis of Appalachian Trail Culture

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Yogi-ing Purists, Trail Magic and Men in Skirts:

An Analysis of Appalachian Trail Culture

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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An Analysis of Appalachian Trail Culture

Shellie L. Andrews

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the motivations and experiences of those thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail in the 20th and 21st Century. A detailed analysis examines the influence of conservationism, urban development, and collective American values on trail culture. The analysis uses Susan Fast's methodology from her 2000 article, "Rethinking Issues of Gender and Sexuality in Led Zeppelin: A Woman's view of Pleasure and Power in Hard Rock," as a model. Personal experiences from hiking the A.T. in 2003 are analyzed in juxtaposition with other hiker's written accounts. The bulk of these journals come from the website TrailJournals.com.

The Appalachian Trail extends over 2,100 miles from Georgia to Maine. The A.T. was initiated based on the ideas of Benton MacKaye. The trail was completed in 1937 and is now used by three to four million people per year. The popularity of hiking the trail has increased with time, in part due to people's perceived ideas of what nature holds for them. The study explores various accounts of those who found themselves in transition, such as retiring, graduating from school, or experiencing a divorce. These individuals looked to hiking the Appalachian Trail as an enriching experience before going back to normalcy in everyday society.

This particular form of outdoor recreation is contingent upon the individual's experience living in an urban/suburban environment. Hikers escape from and yet long for connectivity to civilization. The Appalachian Trail is therefore an environment that not only reveals Americans' ideal of nature but what Americans value. This study looks at the unique outdoors experience hikers face and the

emergence of their transformative selves that result from such an adventure. It reveals common trends in hiker motivations over the years, and contrasts thru-hiking culture with collective values promoted by modern American society.

## Introduction

Hiking the Appalachian Trail has become a unique American tradition over the last thirty years. The Appalachian Trail (A.T.) is a continuous footpath over 2,100 miles long, which runs through 14 states along the eastern part of the United States, extending from Georgia to Maine. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy website [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org), three to four million people hike portions of the trail each year. Modern Americans use the Appalachian Trail to counteract their experiences in an urban, consumer-focused society. Trail culture has been especially influenced by thru-hikers: those who are lured to hike the whole length of the Appalachian Trail in a single continuous stretch. Conservationism, urban development, and collective American values have also played key roles in shaping this exclusive trail culture.

Over the past century, several influential figures such as President Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Annie Dillard have guided the American perception of outdoor recreation. As phenomena such as National Parks, conservation initiatives, and suburban life evolved, Americans' need of an escape to nature took on a distinctive new shape. With the convenient proximity of nature trails, Americans who lived in urban locations had a refuge from their day-to-day lives. Intellectuals at the time, such as Roderick Nash, Leo Marx and John Keats developed the philosophy that this deep appreciation people felt for nature was a result of their limited existence in the urban setting. Natural landscapes provided a change of scenery and a place where Americans could simplify their complicated existence. Americans in the cities loved nature because it offered simplicity, beauty and the potential for spiritual growth. The Appalachian Trail culture also came with

an alternative set of collective values that was markedly different from the urban lifestyle. Competition for resources and materialism were temporarily replaced with trust and reciprocity.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring potential trends in hiker motivations while examining the cultural elements of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. I will look at secondary materials from academic thinkers as well as personal journals from thru-hikers on the popular trailjournals.com website. I plan to model my analysis on Susan Fasts' 2000 study of gender and sexuality in the music of Led Zeppelin. Fast was not only an observer, but also a participant in her research. I too, intend to include my personal experience of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail in 2003 along with other documented accounts from those who have thru-hiked. The studies of the journals reveal how those who have hiked the trail interpret its significance in relation to their lives in mainstream society. Americans who maneuver the trail leave key aspects of their everyday lives and take on new identities and values while hiking. The Appalachian Trail is therefore an environment that not only reveals Americans' ideal of nature but what Americans value. Those who hike the Appalachian Trail shape a dynamic social construct which holds facets of the natural world as well as the industrialized one.

## Chapter One: A New Trail is Born

In order to truly understand trail culture, we must first examine the unique historical and cultural factors that led to the original inception of the trail. The idea of the Appalachian Trail (A.T) emerged during a period of conflicting wilderness philosophies. This visionary concept, proposed by Benton MacKaye, reflected the mixed views of the time by combining conservationism and regional planning.

Benton MacKaye's original inspiration involving a long continuous trail began early in his life. As a child in Shirley, Massachusetts, MacKaye explored the countryside and even created geographic maps from his foot travels. It was perhaps at that time that Benton first fell in love with the outdoors. When visiting Washington D.C. for two months at the age of 11, his passion for nature was evident as he chose to spend his time studying birds at the Smithsonian (Anderson 19). Benton MacKaye was still unsure of his life's focus when he attended Harvard in 1869. During this time, he went on several life-changing hikes in the White and Green Mountains.

In search of a focus for his studies and his future career, MacKaye was inspired by Gifford Pinchot, who was recruiting students for the forestry program. After obtaining his degree in Geology, Benton returned to Harvard to study forestry and received his graduate degree in 1905 (Anderson 53-54). In 1911, MacKaye was hired to work for the Forest Service as a "forest examiner" under Gifford Pinchot (Anderson 69). Working for Pinchot had a significant influence on the early development of MacKaye's environmental views.

Pinchot was the head of the Forest Service and controversial at the time due to his ideas on using wilderness areas for utilitarian purposes. Theodore Roosevelt created the Forest Service and also had strong opinions regarding the wilderness frontier



(Miller 156). Roosevelt handpicked Pinchot for the job of heading the Forest Service. Both men believed that the solution to the depletion of the environment “lay in federal regulation of the public lands and, where appropriate, scientific management of these lands’ natural resources; only this approach guided by appropriate experts would ensure the land’s survival” (Miller 150). This method of conservation protected wilderness as a commodity used to sustain the national economy.

Both men were also bonded by Roosevelt’s concept of “The Strenuous Life.” Roosevelt had addressed the Hamilton Club years before with this idea. He stated in his speech that “if you are rich and are worth your salt, you will teach your sons that though they may have leisure, it is not to be spent in idleness” (Roosevelt 4). Physical strength and work were ways to gain and maintain good health. Being fit and active became the new masculine ideal, and men who were influenced by Roosevelt’s speech competed zealously against one another in physical activities such as wrestling and boxing.

Roosevelt’s speech to the Hamilton Club was very powerful and it helped generate a physical fitness movement. Urban Americans with little or no interaction with nature became involved in outdoor pursuits. The one popular outdoor activity available to anyone became walking. According to Harvey Green, Roosevelt’s new ideas on open-air exploits were an “antidote to the urban experience of most Americans” (Green 237). Because of Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for the outdoors, camping became fashionable. Authors began to write about the outdoors experience for those living in the cities. Harvey Green explained that “outdoor camping—essentially a rustic version of middle-class home-life became a popular vacation activity for many Victorian men and women, especially after the publication of W.H.H. Murray’s *Adventure in the Wilderness* in 1869” (Green 156). MacKaye,

persuaded by Roosevelt's "Strenuous Life" argument, would later unite hiking with camping in his idea for an Appalachian Trail.

Roosevelt, an advocate of the accumulation of additional land for National Parks, concluded that Americans needed a government-guided scenic experience. Roosevelt advanced the notion that with government assistance nature could be controlled. According to Peter J. Schmitt, "the man on the street looked to the Federal Government to preserve the National Parks as symbols of wild nature, even at the expense of the man on the land, who found himself a trespasser on the public domain" (Schmitt 156). Because Gifford Pinchot was very much aligned with this way of thinking, he was the perfect candidate to head the Forest Service Department.

Being friends with John Muir at the time may have also helped Pinchot get this position. John Muir had gained recognition from writing about his mountain climbing experiences, mostly in the Sierras of California. From there he grew more involved in the protection of the forests. With the Sierra forests in mind, Muir created the Sierra Club. His published writings changed to public letters in his response to the wilderness destruction he saw around him (Fox 106). Muir was also instrumental in advocating that the Yosemite region in California should become a National Park modelled after Yellowstone (Fox 99).

Gifford Pinchot was politically focused and may have used his relationship with the well-liked John Muir in order to further his career. John Muir was quite popular at the time and had a lot of national appeal. Muir and Pinchot met each other through a mutual friend in 1892 and became acquainted (Miller 125-128). Their relationship was later tested over a disagreement on whether sheep should graze on federally protected lands (Miller 123). Muir was completely against having sheep graze, as he believed it destroyed the forest. Pinchot, however, was not convinced and allowed it

to occur (Miller 124). The two men's land ethic represented an early schism in the conservation movement.

Gifford Pinchot and John Muir were divided due to their core beliefs on how nature should be used. John Muir represented the preservationists' stance of protecting the pure sanctity of nature. Gifford Pinchot, on the other hand, stood for conservationism that called for the forest to be protected and at the same time used for its resources. Pinchot was a powerful force in how wilderness was viewed and used in the political arena during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier in his career, Pinchot had lobbied for a distinct natural area reserved for the purposes of resource management. This would be the defining distinction between National Parks and National Forests (Miller 196).

Pinchot supported land protection in order to tap its natural resources. He had been quoted as saying, "the use of natural resources for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time" (Anderson 61). Pinchot therefore advocated using the forests to produce goods and revenue in a controlled environment. Muir, on the other hand, believed nature should be left intact without manipulation. This was also his motivating source for forming the Sierra Club (Miller 127). Once Pinchot became head of the Forest Department, his relationship with Muir deteriorated. According to Char Miller, "Pinchot was now a professional insider, a power broker whose source of strength lay in the political networks he constructed in Washington and nationwide, and in the managerial solutions he brought to bear on environmental matters" (Miller 138).

It is not clear how strongly Benton MacKaye felt about Pinchot's utilitarian philosophies and his support of projects using the forest for human consumption at the time. In his later writings, he was very much against human invasion of wilderness

(Anderson 66). MacKaye would later write that using the forest for commercial profit was taking away the spiritual essence of the wilderness and destroying its true purpose.

Benton MacKaye's idea of a long continuous trail was shaped by the wilderness philosophies of Roosevelt, Muir and even Henry David Thoreau as much as by Pinchot. The origin of his idea for a continuous foot trail is not quite clear. In the Foreword of Ronald Fisher's book, *The Appalachian Trail*, MacKaye vaguely recalls, "Somewhere, sometime back there near the end of the old century, the notion of an Appalachian Trail occurred to me" (5). He goes on to say, "I find in this a note of optimism for our sometimes gloomy world. With pollution and overpopulation spawning a sprawling urban desert, I am encouraged by the knowledge that there are millions in America who care about wilderness and mountains"(Fisher 5). It has also been said by many that his idea for the A.T. came to him when he was on top of Stratton Mountain in Vermont. It remains uncertain how exactly the idea was formulated in MacKaye's mind. Whatever the case, it was on MacKaye's mind for some time before he put it in written form (King 4).

MacKaye first expressed his idea for a trail in an essay titled, "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," published in the *American Institute of Architects* in 1921. MacKaye imagined a system of work camps and communities in the mountains, all connected by a trail that ran from the highest point in New England to the highest point in the South. MacKaye called it the "Appalachian Trail."

When examining MacKaye's reasons for the trail, the influence of Roosevelt's "Strenuous Life" philosophy is clear. MacKaye was concerned with how "civilization" would affect untouched land. Civilization, as defined by MacKaye, was composed of an urban industrialized existence. It was in this article that he laid out

his most powerful argument against living in a refined world: “We civilized ones also, whether urban or rural, are potentially helpless as canaries in a cage. The ability to cope with nature directly -- unshielded by the weakening wall of civilization-is one of the admitted needs of modern times.” In his analysis of social structure he mentions people’s obsession with productivity: “The customary approach to the problem of living relates to work rather than play.... The new approach reverses this mental process.” The Appalachian Trail therefore was a remedy for Americans who focused too much on making a living. This is very similar to what Henry David Thoreau wrote about in *Walden*. Thoreau theorized that “most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labours of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them” (Thoreau 4-5).

MacKaye outlined three benefits to having an extended trail in the East: first for recreation, second for health, and third for employment opportunities (26/10/2006<http://www.fred.net> 4). MacKaye asserted that this trail system “could save thousands of lives” (26/10/2006<http://www.fred.net> 4). The unhealthy would have a place to heal, and individuals who could not find work and struggled financially would have access to communities where there was employment. Those living in the overcrowded confines of the city would be in close proximity to the healing alternative of the Appalachian Trail.

MacKaye’s plan was very much aligned with the regional planning approach of urban design. The overall goal was to gain some control over what appeared to be an unravelling infrastructure. Part of this unbalance was the result of rapid population growth in the cities. MacKaye was concerned that attempts to accommodate this increased population would result in poorly planned urban expansion. His regional

plan of the Appalachian Trail was his solution in dealing with overcrowded cities. (26/10/2006<http://www.fred.net> 4). MacKaye was seeking a self-sustaining, cooperative environment. His plan for the project included four parts. The first part involved the trail itself. Much of the trail up until that point already existed. MacKay's plan outlined how the trail would be divided into sections and vigorously maintained as a preventive measure against forest fires. The second part involved the construction of shelter camps spaced within walking distance of one another. The third part had to do with creating small community groups occupying 100 acres on or close to the trail. MacKaye proposed that the people in this commune atmosphere would organize their community so outsiders could use it for recreation or good health. The last part was the development of farm camps whose purpose was "get back to the land" ([www.fred.net/kathy/at/mackaye2.html](http://www.fred.net/kathy/at/mackaye2.html)). MacKaye suggested using Camp Tamiment as a model (a prosperous, self sufficient camp known to be a recreational spot for Socialists in the 1920s). MacKaye strove to save humankind from itself. As one author sees it, "MacKaye's whole work product after college tells the story of a man seeking to affect what he saw as the harm that rapid mechanization and urbanization inflicts on mankind" (King 4-5). This viewpoint was the foundation for a new group beginning to form in the early 1920s: the Regional Planning Association of America.

The Regional Planning Association was created in 1923 in New York City as a response to industrialization. The group's intention was to study American trends in architecture, housing, transportation, and land-use development in order to develop an efficient urban system (Anderson 171). Cities were expanding and populations growing exponentially. Undeveloped territory was in danger of urban encroachment. The Regional Planning movement attempted to resolve the problems of the expanding

cities. Peter Schmitt writes that “there was a feeling of urgency in the Regional Planning movement—a feeling that cities at flood tide could overrun the countryside” (Schmitt 183). The cities were seen as an interruption to the ideal pastoral landscape. Regional Planning was more than designing an urban environment that eliminated congestion. Regional Planning attempted to heal ailing urbanites in their damaged surroundings. MacKaye’s solution for those living in the sick cities was to create a nature trail, close to where they lived.

MacKaye's article, “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning” received some recognition, and he spent the next few years promoting his idea. MacKaye attended the 1924 National Conference on Outdoor Recreation as a representative of the Regional Planning Association of America. He was able to drum up support for his A.T. proposal from various wilderness activists at this meeting (Anderson 185). These same activists met in Washington D.C. at the Hotel Raleigh on March 2, 1925 to form a new organization which would make the dream of the Appalachian Trail a reality (Anderson 186). From this meeting the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) was formed and committee members were chosen. In addition, an ATC constitution was drafted which included the approval of the construction of the Appalachian Trail. It was determined that there would be five separate regions (New England, New York/New Jersey, Pennsylvania, central Appalachian states and southern Appalachian states) responsible for providing volunteer support in routing and maintaining the trail (Sutton 63). Government agencies, such as the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, would also play a significant role.

Originally, the ATC wanted the trail to be completed the following year. This, however, proved to be too ambitious (King 6). There were many more discussions of A.T. efforts after the 1925 meeting, but not a lot of trail work had been done due to

lack of funding. Franklin D. Roosevelt, chairman of the New York's Taconic State Park Commission, denied the request for funding the trail work in 1925 & 1926 (Anderson 212). The money and physical endeavor were largely produced by the Appalachian Trail Clubs themselves who were completely dedicated to the idea. Membership in the trail clubs increased at this time as more and more people took up an interest in hiking. According to King, "The first two decades of the century had seen the emergence not only of forest conservation, but also of a strong hiking or 'tramping' movement in New England and New York"(King 4). Increased activism at this time was good news for the A.T. project.

There were certain individuals who devoted more of their time to completing the A.T. than others (Garvey 9-10). The most important figure in A.T. besides Benton MacKaye was Myron Avery. Many say that the A.T. was MacKaye's creative idea, but it would not exist without the efforts put forth by Avery (Garvey 9).

Avery was born and raised in Maine and was president of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. Once involved with the A.T. initiative, Avery surveyed and measured the whole length of the Appalachian Trail. Avery took a hands-on-approach, as he scouted, walked, blazed, mapped and measured the entire A.T. In addition to that, Avery wrote guidebooks, published newspaper articles and collaborated with Federal agencies and organized volunteers (King 8).

In the beginning, MacKaye was very pleased to have Avery's support in implementing his ideas. Eventually deep conflicts evolved between Avery and MacKaye, so much so that after 1931 they would not even speak to each other. In his history of the ATC, Brian King explains that the two men had "radical differences in personal styles, strategy, and tactics and fundamentally different philosophical concepts of what the trail should be" (King 11). MacKaye wanted the trail to be a



solution to society's ills and urban sprawl, while Avery wanted outdoor recreation to be available to everyone. Avery was described as being aggressive and egotistical, which rubbed MacKaye the wrong way since he was more subdued and analytical in nature (King 11). In addition, Avery believed that the trail should be first created then discussions on how the trail would be used would follow. MacKaye had an entirely different position and sought to discuss all aspects of the trail during the A.T. creation (Anderson 270). Avery was more flexible during the formation of the trail due to his focus on what he considered the top priority: completing the trail. When the government wanted to build a tourist drive along the proposed Appalachian Trail, Avery was willing to negotiate, while MacKaye felt it was not an option.

The ATC had made great strides in mapping and marking the trail in the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, only to have the government claim it for road construction in 1935. MacKaye wanted to fight the decision while Avery wanted to allow it to happen. When he first learned of the Park Service's intentions, Avery attempted to negotiate with the agency, but made no headway (Anderson 231). Most in the ATC were against the Skyline Drive, but made no progress in fighting it. According to Anderson, "MacKaye had no real constituency, beyond his little band of hikers—who, in any case, were already breaking ranks over the appropriate tactics for coping with the new fervor for scenic roads" (Anderson 232). In the end the government helped with the rerouting of the trail, mostly out of its own pocket (King 10). Due to his frustration with this loss and the tension with Avery, MacKaye began separating himself from the A.T. project he had created.

MacKaye stopped being actively involved when Avery became president in 1931. MacKaye re-established himself with the ATC once again after Avery passed away in 1952 (King 11). By then Avery had finished with the construction of the trail.

During MacKaye's withdrawal from the A.T. project in the mid thirties he immersed himself in developing the Wilderness Society with his friend Harvey Broome (Anderson 267). The Wilderness Society was created in part as a reactive force against roadway development in the wild. MacKaye's and Broome's intention was to fight to leave nature intact. While MacKaye lost the Skyline Drive battle as the Appalachian Trail Conference sided with Avery, he was able to continue the same battle with the newly formed Wilderness Society (Fox 210). The Wilderness Society represented MacKaye's preservationist leanings, which had lost out, in the struggle to define the A.T., to Avery's more pragmatic and more populist approach.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a distinctive separation between ideas of preservation and conservation. The preservationists, such as John Muir, wanted nature to be intact, while Gifford Pinchot represented the conservationist's approach of using natural resources in order to advance modern society. Benton MacKaye's Regional Planning ideas for the A.T. took elements from both conservationism and preservationism. In his original vision, the trail was intended to tame the rapid growth of industrialism and to keep this growth from developing onto wilderness areas. By 1937, this vision had been compromised in favor of a purely recreational vision for the trail. But beginning in the 1940s, a new wave of thinking offered a synthesis of these duelling philosophies. As a result of this wave of "environmentalism," hiking the trail gained significant momentum.

## Chapter Two: Trail Culture Emerges

By 1940 the vision of the A.T. had become a reality; over the next few decades an ever-increasing number of Americans would take advantage of this new trail system. This new breed of hikers started to develop what would later become known as “trail culture.” Several well-known thinkers guided and documented this notable process. Following the Second World War, Aldo Leopold’s ideas of ecology were particularly important, because of the growing phenomenon of suburban sprawl.

There was a rapid growth of suburbs during the late 1940s and early 1950s. World War II was over, and many who had served in the war looked to the suburbs as an ideal place to live and have a family. Most Americans in urban and suburban settings were unaware of the direct link nature had to their lives. There was little consideration of the impact that overdevelopment would have on undeveloped regions.

During this period, Americans’ need for an escape to nature took a distinctive new shape. With the convenient proximity of nature trails such as the Appalachian Trail, Americans who lived in urban locations had a refuge from their day-to-day lives. Natural landscapes provided a change of scenery and a place where Americans could simplify their complicated existence. Americans in the cities loved nature because nature offered simplicity, beauty and the potential for spiritual growth. These Americans living in an industrialized society with congested highways, crowds of people walking the streets, steel structures, and concrete walkways felt disconnected from nature. They were drawn to the elements of the natural world found in suburban settings. Intellectuals at the time, such as Roderick Nash and Leo Marx, developed

the philosophy that this deep appreciation people felt for nature was a result of their limited existence in an industrialized society.

Roderick Nash was especially successful in developing insight into people's changing perception of the outdoors. Americans went from an intangible fear of wilderness and withdrawal from nature in the years before the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a deep unshakable yearning to be in it beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not that urbanites disdained their immediate environment. Cities offered theaters, restaurants, concerts and bustling activity for the active explorer. On the other hand, nature offered a quieter setting ideal for a reflective look at an internal self.

Roderick Nash argued in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1964) that people love nature, but love civilization as well (Epilogue). Civilization is a necessary ingredient in appreciating nature. Nash further asserted that "appreciation of wilderness began in the cities" (Nash 44). This is true of individuals who are lured to hiking the Appalachian Trail and spending a significant amount of time away from a restrictive social order. The Appalachian Trail experience is not a complete rejection of mainstream society. Individuals who hike the trail do so with the intention of returning to their urban/suburban life afterwards for a fresh start. The idea emerged that in order to become a more productive member of mainstream society one must disassociate oneself from one's conditioned patterns of behavior. Nash was not the only scholar to understand the significance of this process. Leo Marx analyzed this pattern as well.

Marx contended in his book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) that in order to escape the repression of the city, it was necessary for one to withdraw into the raw, untouched wilderness. Most Americans could not stay too long in the wilderness, however, since they came from and belonged in urban surroundings. Yet without the

escape to the wild, one would continue to be repressed, so, according to Marx, such a journey was necessary for well being. To venture into an untouched landscape would make the city less harsh after all (Marx 71). Marx makes this argument in analyzing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in connection to colonial America. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare wrote about the struggle between the forces of nature and the forces of a developed society. This same conflict existed in the early structuring of American culture. Marx published his book in the sixties when Americans were looking to remedy the corruption they found in the cities with a pastoral ideal. Americans who felt confined by their closely controlled surroundings were also able to release social restraints in the natural world.

Early thru-hikers of the trail would demonstrate that both Nash and Marx were accurate in their assessment that living in society brought out a basic need to commune with nature. While living in suburban and urban areas hikers were becoming more attracted to the natural world while maintaining their connection to society. Owen Allen, who thru-hiked in 1960, stated that "hiking, after all, is an avocation. Hiking, and the Appalachian Trail itself, have been promoted almost exclusively by city people who feel a need to reestablish contact with nature" (Hare vol. 1 358).

Annie Dillard was an example of a person who came from an urban environment to live for one year along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. Her purpose was to live away from the city and hike along the trails of the forested areas. Dillard documented her experience in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). The book is a Thoreau-like account of her gentle wanderings around the Appalachian Trail, mostly around the Tinker Creek area. Dillard was inspired by Thoreau's Walden experience (she had written

her thesis on Thoreau's *Walden*). It was a book of her observations around Tinker Creek and what she learned.

Like Thoreau at Walden Pond, while Dillard was at Tinker Creek she lived unhindered by the boundaries of society and spent many hours alone, having only limited interactions with other people. Dillard's time in the woods allowed her to develop the art of "seeing," which for her was the equivalent of "letting go" (Dillard 31). Dillard was able to develop insights into the meaning of life from her attentive awareness to the laws of nature. She wrote that "self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies. It is the glimpse of oneself in a storefront window, the unbidden awareness of reactions on the faces of other people -- the novelist's world, not the poet's" (Dillard 81). Though she eventually returned to civilization, she was able to do so in the advanced state of self-actualization. Dillard's account of her connection to nature resonated with many individuals thru-hiking the A.T.

Dillard's time in the woods differed from Thoreau's in that she had all the comforts of home when she returned from her explorations. Her cat, goldfish, and comfortable bed were available to her after her excursions in the wild. She did not insist on the strict dichotomy between nature and civilization that Thoreau had relied upon earlier. Another figure who helped to develop similar ideas of the human-nature connection was Aldo Leopold. Leopold took a scientific approach to analyzing the human effect on nature. Leopold worked for the U.S. Forest Service in the 1920s where he began to develop an integrated view of nature that blurred preservationist and conservationist qualities. He argued that nature was a community in which humans were an active part despite the distance they may feel from nature. For example, a person living in New York City may have an indirect impact on a river

system three miles away just by driving three miles to work every day. Leopold understood this interaction between two environments. He approached conservation with a comprehensive understanding of how nature worked and the humanistic meaning behind these workings. Editors Knight and Riedel, in their book, *Aldo Leopold and the Ecological Conscience* (2002), explain that “as a forester, he [Leopold] helped to push the boundaries of the field outward to include issues of soil erosion, recreation, game protection and wilderness preservation” (Knight and Riedel 18). Leopold used scientific data to demonstrate the correlation between the use/abuse of land and the state of humanity.

Leopold was best known for this powerful book, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949). In it, he claimed that wilderness was dwindling, and solitude in nature was becoming more difficult to find. He advocated for more wilderness areas to be protected for Americans to enjoy. He openly opposed the U.S. government’s policies regarding wilderness conservation. Leopold lamented: “All conservation of wilderness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness to cherish” (Fox 101). Leopold’s position on conservation may seem contradictory, since he saw that in order for wilderness to flourish there must be limited human interaction, but at the same time he believed that individual interaction with the outdoors was an important human endeavor.

In his book, he addressed his misgivings about the U.S. Forest Service’s work in wilderness protection. To Leopold, the Forest Service was dividing up the land depending on how it was to be used. He wanted to show that this was an unrealistic view of how nature worked (Fox 195). Leopold felt that public attitudes about land use had to change and the best way to achieve that was through education. Up until

then the public had used land in ways that made immediate profit without thought for their long term effect (Fox 263). The political and economic climate fostered ideas that focused on immediate needs and short-term benefits.

Leopold studied the systems in nature in depth and was able to coherently explain in his book three key points: “That land is not merely soil, that the native plants and animals kept the energy circuit open; others may not, and that man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen” (Leopold 218). The elements in nature had their own system more complex than originally thought. It was Leopold’s hope that through scientific analysis, a social change towards wilderness preservation would take place. In many ways he achieved what he set out to do.

Pioneer thru-hikers shared the concerns of critics like Leopold regarding the social costs of unchecked development. These individuals would become an important though less known voice in modern society. Individuals from various walks of life turned to the Appalachian Trail to temporarily escape the confines of society and search for meaning. These hikers were a new form of environmentalist.

The first person to complete a thru-hike was Earl Schaffer, who did so in 1948 after reading in a newspaper article that an attempt had never been made (Schaffer 8). He would later write a book about this experience, *Walking with Spring* (1982), based on a journal he wrote at the time. Schaffer represented those Americans who felt inhibited by the regimented structure of society. He had just gotten out of the Army and like many others wanted to break away from obedience to authority.

He explained his motives: "Why not hike the army out of my system, both mentally and physically [and] take pictures and notes along the way” (Schaffer 8). For Schaffer, hiking the Appalachian Trail provided the freedom to move without any



restrictions, assisting him as he was going through an emotional transition in his return to civilian life. Hikers after him continued to share the same motivations. Chuck Ebersole, who thru-hiked in 1964 with his son John, remarked: “Finally, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1964, after 23 years of service, I retired from the U.S. Navy... I answered the call of the trail” (Hare, vol. 1, 400). Fixation with hiking the Appalachian Trail was typical for those undergoing a transformation like finishing school, retiring, or going through a divorce or illness. When I decided to pursue a thru-hike in 2003, I was also going through a transition. I was unhappy with my job and knew I would be quitting. I felt it was a perfect opportunity to accomplish a life-long dream while reassessing my life goals. Leaving the structured life I lived was another added incentive.

John Keats, like Schaffer, recognized the restrictions that the homogeneous suburban environment had on those that lived there. Keats understood the lasting implications of fast profit as he chronicled the negative impact of the expanding suburban environment. In his opinion, land was being developed to produce a standardized society in which all homes looked the same. American families bought into the ideology that ownership of this suburban existence equated to happiness. In *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), Keats contended, "Generally speaking, our problems fall into two major categories: those posed by developments already in existence; those posed by developments to come" (165). Keats portrayed John and Mary Drone and their two children, a typical American family in the fifties. John Drone was a WWII veteran able to afford a suburban home. The suburbs supposedly offered the dream life for his family. In the Drones' pursuit of happiness, however, there was an ache of loneliness and despair. Mary Drone dreams of being away from the suburbs: “Selling out at some future time is the dream of nearly all development

families. Like her neighbors, Mary regarded her house, whether in Rolling Knolls or in Merryland Dell, as a temporary expedient” (Keats 171).

While some social critics like John Keats found it likely that fleeing from the urban atmosphere into a suburban one proved disappointing, many Americans still flocked to it. Americans in the suburbs found comfort being in a simulated natural space without having to completely give up their luxuries of technological conveniences. Americans were attracted to suburban space because it provided more open spaces than the cities.

Yet the massive suburban destruction of natural spaces brought on newly discovered environmental hazards. The Appalachian Trail was an area that offered those living in suburban settings a protected natural area to go to. The A.T. was a more ecologically friendly environment for those who were conscious of environmental issues. A.T. hikers of the sixties were moved into action by Rachel Carson’s well published study on the environment.

Rachel Carson caught the public’s attention in the early sixties by documenting significant environmental issues. Carson described in her book *Silent Spring* (1962) how the chemicals and pesticides whose purpose was to kill annoying insects affected the earth’s water systems. She particularly focused on how the Department of Agriculture implemented chemical attacks as a means to control the environment. Carson argued that such practices were not without a moral cost. She contended that “the question is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized. These insecticides are not selective poisons; they do not single out the one species of which we desire to be rid” (Carson 99). The government was not only harming that which it wanted to destroy, but also everything it wanted to protect.

Americans were feeling the effects of these poisons. Carson affirmed through research that “cities receiving their drinking water from rivers had a higher death rate from cancer than those whose water came from sources presumably less susceptible to pollution such as wells” (Carson 50). Before Carson’s book was published, the government was not doing much to protect citizens from the detrimental effects of pollution. However, with the popularity of Carson’s book, this would change.

Carson stimulated wilderness activist groups such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society to increase their efforts towards wilderness preservation. These groups believed that the survival of humanity depended upon the protection of the environment. Stephen Fox argued that the popular civil rights and anti war movements of the 1960s were replaced by environmentalism in the 1970s (Fox 325). The government could not afford to ignore the public’s increased awareness of the human connection to nature. Politicians were then forced to make policy changes in favor of environmental protection. The Clean Air Act was passed in 1963 and was amended several times throughout the decades. The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, which federally protected untouched land, especially National Forests. The Clean Water Act was passed in 1972. Politicians were more than ever focused on protecting the earth’s natural resources as they themselves were personally affected by damage to the environment.

Senator Gaylord Nelson was an example of such a politician who created a day for celebrating earth after seeing a devastating oil spill in California. The first official Earth Day was designated on April 22, 1970. According to Fox, Earth Day represented “the largest environmental demonstration in history” (Fox 325). Fox demonstrated the power of the first Earth Day when, “six months after Earth Day, the *New Republic* devoted an entire issue to the environment. Earth Day, said the editors,

had been ‘not just a channel for frustrated antiwar energies, as we thought. It signalled an awakening to the dangers in a dictatorship of technology’” (Fox 326). Due to the increased government activity, the Environmental Protection Agency was created to act as a monitoring agency.

In the seventies, parallel to all the changing policies to protect the environment, the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) became concerned with suburban encroachment. The population in the east coast cities was increasing rapidly as well as the demand for land. This became a serious threat to the Appalachian Trail. The Appalachian Trail Conference knew they had to fight politically to safeguard the Appalachian Trail. The ATC worked hard and was able to actively participate in the passing of The National Trails System Act in 1968. This was a monumental step in establishing permanent protection of the Appalachian Trail.

However, for the ATC this was not enough. Activists in the ATC pushed politicians to take even more action. With the threat of suburban interference, the areas surrounding the Appalachian Trail were left vulnerable to development. The ATC was again active in ensuring that the land around the pathway was also protected. Eventually the Appalachian Trail Bill was passed by Congress in 1978. This bill enabled the ATC to buy land surrounding the Appalachian Trail using government funds, which they wasted no time in doing (King 56-57). The Appalachian Trail Bill was a big win for the ATC in the preservation of the Appalachian Trail and minimized the threat of suburban encroachment.

Between 1940 and 1980, there were many transformations made pertaining to the preservation of the Appalachian Trail. After World War II, fresh ideas of wilderness conservation surfaced. A key figure, Aldo Leopold redirected people’s thinking about nature in redefining how nature truly functioned. Americans struggled to understand

the interpenetration of the natural and human worlds. Living in the suburbs, separated from undeveloped landscapes, strengthened people's desire for outdoor recreation. Ironically, the construction of suburbs meant the destruction of natural areas. The Appalachian Trail fought to defend itself from this type of development. Though the suburbs and the Appalachian Trail were similar in attracting nature lovers, there were distinguishing differences. While the suburban environment contained elements of manicured nature, the Appalachian Trail was a natural system with far less human impact. Americans living in the suburbs enjoyed open spaces and a sense of being more in nature, while those hiking the Appalachian Trail were more aware of the environmental impact of suburban sprawl.

### Chapter Three: The Culture of Thru-Hiking

The Trail survived the threat of suburban sprawl and urban encroachment while evolving a thriving culture of regular hikers. Before World War II, no one thought it possible that anyone could hike the whole trail in one continuous trip. Earl Schaffer established that it was indeed possible and in doing so created the genesis of a new trail culture. This new Appalachian Trail culture offered the contrasting elements of wilderness and civilization, solitude and community bonding.

The idea of thru-hiking the entire trail began with Earl Schaffer in 1948; however, Edward Garvey would propel this cultural movement in the seventies with his widely read book, *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* (1970). Edward Garvey thru-hiked the trail himself in 1970. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Garvey's publication helped to "fuel" the concept of thru-hiking. Garvey captured the imagination of many by describing in his book his adventures on the trail. In one experience Garvey explains his surprised reaction to encountering a group of nudists on the trail: "I could not get a good look at the second person. However, when I drew abreast—and I choose that word carefully—I saw that the second person was a very curvaceous young lady; and she was not wearing dungarees, nor was she wearing anything else! She seemed a little new at the nudist game and somewhat ill at ease. As I came within speaking distance, she giggled and said, 'Nice day, hunh?' I smiled and replied with an enthusiastic, 'Indeed it is!'" (Garvey 256). When Garvey hiked in 1970, there were only nine other thru-hikers. But after his book was published, the number of thru-hikers soared. In 1973 there were 89 recorded completions; by 1979 that number rose to 128 ([www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org)).

Garvey had been active in his local hiking club, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC), since 1952. He became the Supervisor of Trails for the club in 1959 and also acted as the Appalachian Trail Conference Secretary from 1964 to 1967. During his extensive hikes while holding these positions, he ran across thru-hikers and was inspired to complete an A.T. thru-hike himself (Garvey 4-5). Garvey retired from his work at the Soil Conservation Service in 1970 and immediately took to the trail.

The popularity of thru-hiking caught the attention of the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC). With the number of thru-hikers rising, the ATC decided to name this unique group “2000-milers”. Hikers in this 2000-miler club formed their own alliance with one another and began to enjoy the social aspects of the trail. Thru-hikers came together on the trail to share a common goal: to hike the whole trail from end-to-end at one time.

For thru-hikers, as earlier demonstrated, motivations for hiking the trail were consistently similar. Disconnecting from society and reconnecting to a deeper self was a central theme for most wanting to hike the trail in one continuous journey. A part of that practice involved shedding the old identity and creating a new one. According to *Backpacker* magazine, "As part of their pilgrimage, most thru-hikers assume a new identity—a trail name. Trail names on the A.T. go back at least to the early seventies, but they caught on in the late seventies, when the number of hikers increased dramatically" (<http://gorp.away.com/gorp/books/excerpts/thruhike.htm> 02/28/2007).

Peregrine, who thru-hiked in 1973, stated: "As I prepared for my Maine to Georgia thru hike in the Spring of 1973, I got to thinking that once I actually lit out on the adventure, I would take on a new persona requiring a fresh label. I decided to call

myself Peregrine, because I was a great admirer of falcons, because I was embarking on a 2,000-mile peregrination, and because I had a self-inflated view of myself -- typical for a 21 year old. I guess I was among the first of the thru hikers to tag myself with a trail name” ([www.atmuseum.org/trailnames](http://www.atmuseum.org/trailnames)).

For thru-hikers, using trail names symbolized the first rite of passage into the hiking culture. Trail names are meaningful to the hiker, revealing who they would like to become as well as a personality trait or a name taken from a significant experience on the trail. Gonzo (Alan Strackeljahn), who thru hiked in 1983, decided his trail name would be “Gonzo” after getting the idea from his friend during a previous hike. Gonzo describes how his name came about after his friend got unexpectedly pricked by a cactus: “the spirit of the word suited the expedition. The name came about as a result of an expedition that a friend and he made to Chester, Illinois, to locate fossilized ripple marks along the banks of the Mississippi River. Dave climbed above him on the bluff to look, while he searched below. While looking for the fossils, a bunch of prickly pear cactus came flying out of nowhere as Dave yelled "Gonzo!" from the cliff above. In that spirit I chose "Gonzo!" as my trail name - going for it.... No holds barred!” ([www.atmuseum.org/trailnames](http://www.atmuseum.org/trailnames)).

When I thru-hiked the trail in 2003, I chose to name myself “Sparky” based on my initial experience of hiking the Appalachian Trail years before. During my original visit on the trail a large ember from the fire blew in my mouth. Friends present who witnessed this called me “Sparky” for the remainder of the trip. When I set out later to thru-hike, I returned to the name “Sparky,” as this was the name I had earned my first time on the Appalachian Trail. The name “Sparky” also for me symbolized my drive or spark, to thru-hike the whole A.T. Some other examples of Trail names from 2003, the year I hiked, were: Lost and Found, Awol, Commander in Chief, Detour,



Footslogger, Gator, Green Turtle, Journey, Molasses, Moose, Moose Munch, Mudd Butt, No Pepsi, Snotrocket, Dingleberry, Wrong Way Brown and 56 (trailjournals.com). The vast majority of thru-hikers use trail names and it is rare to come across a thru-hiker who does not.

There are other ways that hikers use to identify themselves. This involves their method of following blazes on the trail. Blazes are marks on the trees that indicate the path of the trail. White blazes indicate the official path of the Appalachian Trail. A thru-hiker who passes all the white blazes is called a purist. Dr. Warren Doyle, a well known purist, has created a class for those who want to succeed at completing a purist thru-hike. For a price one can pay to be a part of Doyle's thru-hiking expedition, for which he claims a 75% success rate. His trail philosophy is that "if your goal is to walk the ENTIRE Appalachian Trail, then do it. People who take shortcuts (i.e., *blue blazes*,) or hitchhike do so because it usually is shorter, quicker, and/or easier. So where is the challenge in that? We have enough 'shortcuts' in the real world (i.e., *ENRON*, *personal bankruptcies*)" (Doyle 2). Doyle, like other purists, longed to complete the official trail in order to gain confidence and a sense of true accomplishment in achieving a difficult feat.

Purist hiker Jumpstart explains in his trailjournals blog: "Today, I hiked almost 27 miles only to find two other hikers that I'd passed the day before, now at the same point as me on the trail. I'm a firm believer in the 'hike your own hike' mantra, but somehow it seems to cheapen what I've accomplished when these folks call themselves thru-hikers but don't sweat the miles" (trailjournals.com). Purist thru-hikers are the most goal-oriented hikers, adopting Roosevelt's "strenuous life" ideology. Their incentive lies in conquering the physical challenges of the environment with limited support. While the experience is rewarding, purists want to

achieve the challenge of the hike without the feeling that they are cheating or taking shortcuts. Purists take on an elitist stance, usually viewing those taking shortcuts or missing parts of the trail as having less honour. During my 2003 thru-hike it was vital for me to pass every white blaze and I was proud to be identified as a purist since for me it added to the legitimacy of my thru-hike.

A blue blazer is a hiker who only hikes by the blue blazes (blue blazes are alternate routes on the Appalachian Trail). Blue blazers claim that their hike is less restrictive than a purist's and they are able to enjoy the trail on their own terms and still be considered a thru-hiker. Blue blazer Twix started out as a purist during his 2007 thru-hike and later became a blue blazer. He writes in his online journal that, "purists pass EVERY white blaze. Under no circumstances will a [sic] staunch purists deviate even the slightest bit from the designated trail. The rules are a little more lax for blue-blazers, who WALK all the way from Maine to Georgia or from Georgia to Maine but have no problem with taking easier or more interesting blue-blazed trails around difficult or boring sections of the white-blazed AT" (trailjournals.com).

Yellow blazers are hikers who combine hiking with hitchhiking to get to where they want to go. Flying Bear's 2003 trail journal from Trail Journals.com describes the benefits of yellow blazing: "I warned other people not to walk through the Wild Life Preserve if they weren't purists. Those who did walk the pointless extra bit through their [sic] refer to it as the Mosquito Preserve, and rightly so" (trailjournals.com). Grizzly Adams, a 2003 thru-hiker, started out as a purist and became a yellow blazer after an unexpected ankle injury. He noted in his Trail Journals entry: "yep. I guess you're right. I would be one of those dreaded yellow blazers. Those damn non purists. I would no longer be following every white blaze,

following the crowd, going with the flow. Well, you should probably know that that is fine by me” (trailjournals.com).

Slack packers are hikers who may hike past blue blazes or white blazes. These types of hikers usually pay someone to drive them to a section of the trail where they can hike light, usually with just a day pack. FedEx describes slack packers in his 2007 Trail Journal entry: “Slack Packers hike sections with no pack or just a small light day pack with snacks and water, no tent, sleeping bag, etc.; generally they’re also considered slackers by thru-hikers” (trailjournals.com). Those who slack pack do so to enjoy nature without being encumbered by their gear. The only time I slack packed on the trail was climbing Mount Katahdin. Most purist thru-hikers, however, have the idea that the reward of hiking the trail lies in overcoming physical tests. Therefore slack packing is less rewarding for a thru-hiker.

Section Hikers pursue a thru-hike in sections. Usually because of work and family commitments they are unable to take an extended amount of time hiking. Bilko, a section hiker, describes in his online journal the difference between thru-hikers and section hikers: “Section hikers are just getting into hiking shape as our section hike is over. Our feet are usually soft when we start off and need a couple of days to get them tough again. We don’t establish the relationships with other hikers on the trail that thru-hikers make” (trailjournals.com). Thru-hikers usually set themselves apart from Section Hikers. With some thru-hikers there may even be hostility towards section hikers. FedEx describes section hikers in his online journal: “I noticed most of the section hikers (Scum!) were still there watching TV, talking big talk, but they hadn’t moved. Guess they’re afraid of the rain. There is little respect from thru-hikers for section hikers who are systematically hiking the whole trail, aggressively going at it” (trailjournals.com).

Though hikers may debate with one another which hiking style is appropriate for a thru-hiker, they typically live by the ethos of “hike your own hike.” The freedom and simplicity of hiking in your own style without any stringent guidelines is the great appeal of thru-hiking the trail. The other side to hiking are the social experiences hikers have with the people they meet on the trail. There are those who through their great respect for those thru-hiking will provide them with treats.

Thru-hikers commonly experience tremendous kindness from strangers who provide transportation, food and accommodations. This thoughtfulness is known as “trail magic.” Wingfoot defines trail magic as “all the wonderful, unexpected things that happen to thru-hikers during their hike” (Wingfoot 171). Trail magic began with the first thru-hiker, Earl Schaffer. Schaffer recalled wanting to return the kind treatment from a man named Ed he met on the trail: “Ed remarked that the proper way was to pass the favor along to someone else” (Schaffer 126). Hikers on the receiving end of this kindness perpetuated this tradition by returning to the trail to give to other thru-hikers. The tradition of trail magic creates a system of positive reciprocity on the trail. One positive act begets another positive act, so that those hiking on the trail experience the perception of prevalent goodwill. Life on the trail is broken down to basic elemental functions: walking, nourishment and sleep. Unlike in everyday society, possessions on the trail are seen as limiting one’s essential functions. Since possessions don’t matter to the thru-hiker, nourishment takes on the quality of the most prized gift.

Thru-hiker SingleMalt’s 1999 online journal on Trail Journals explains: “Equally as rewarding is the unsolicited kindness shown to hikers by people who live near the trail. I know of no other hiker who has not experienced acts of kindness from total strangers, and most of us have been invited into the homes of others and treated like a

member of the family who has been away for a long time” (SingleMalt). Thru-Hiker Roni from Israel wrote about trail magic during his 2003 thru-hike: “This scene [trail magic] happened to me and happens to many hundreds of hikers every year. It is called trail magic. It consists of food and drinks placed on the trail so thruhikers can enjoy them. The people who leave this trail magic are called trail angels and are usually, but not always, former thruhikers who want to give back to the trail what they got when they thruhiked” (Roni).

During my 2003 thru-hike, I also experienced the surprise of kind acts from total strangers. In Salisbury, Connecticut I paid \$50.00 to a local resident who charged hikers to stay in her home. At the end of the night she returned my money and refused to take it back. In addition, she also provided a spot for me at the kitchen table with breakfast in the morning before I resumed my hike. In another situation, I and another thru-hiker received a ride in Rangely, Maine, from an elderly couple who were natives of the town. The hiker I was with spoke about needing to make a phone call. The couple took us to their home to make the phone call and then immediately left, leaving us alone there. They told us to do what we needed to do (make phone calls or take a shower) and to lock the door when we left. Strangers trust thru-hikers because the trail culture values the truthfulness of purpose.

Another tradition on the trail, similar to trail magic, is “yogi-ing,” a conscious effort of a thru-hiker to get food. Possessions, money, and many other material items are not valued in A.T. culture. The average thru-hiker burns more calories than he or she is able to consume, so food is the most valued commodity. Wingfoot defines yogi-ing as “the good-natured art of ‘letting’ food be offered cheerfully by strangers without actually asking them directly” (Wingfoot 171). Thru-hiker Datto’s 2000 journal entry illustrates his failed attempt at yogi-ing: “Alas, I came away hungry and

empty handed. The shame of it. How can I possibly expect to call myself a thru-hiker if I can't even liberate a piece of pie from a kid already hoisting an enormous overweighted backpack?" (trailjournals.com). Besides being a tradition, yogi-ing outlines a moral code that thru-hikers follow while hiking. LilRed in her 2005 journal explains the rules of this strategy: "Some folks were picnicking nearby and we started talking. Next thing I know they're offering me a cold coke and a turkey sandwich. It didn't take me long to accept. SCORE!! This is what hikers call 'yogi-ing', named after Yogi Bear. You set yourself up near people who are eating and usually they'll start asking you about your hike and invariably, they'll offer something out of their picnic basket. It is an art that some hikers have down to a science. The key to yogi-ing food, or anything else for that matter, is that you NEVER, EVER ask for anything. Once you ask, you are no longer yogi-ing, now you are begging, and hikers never beg" (trailjournals.com).

Hikers who receive special treatment from these strangers, also known as trail angels, pass that information onto other hikers, using a creative system of trail registers. Trail registers are usually a notebook attached to a pen that is located in every shelter along the trail. Shelters are spaced within a day's walking distance from one another. Hikers who pass by these registers on the trail often write helpful advice. One could learn where to find the best water near the shelter, to beware of the bear in the area, or that a fellow hiker will meet them at a key spot up ahead on the trail. OFF's (One Foot Forward) 2003 online guestbook reads: "Hey hey, I was parusing [sic] this site for no reason in general, and I found your journal here. So, how was your hike? I know you made it to VT cause I saw your entry in the register I had left" (trailjournals.com). It is customary to write in a trail journal every time you pass one. The trail registers are widely used and read. The Flying Scotsman wrote

during his 2003 thru-hike, “I was so amazed to find so many people there [a hiker celebration] had read my journal or had read my entries in the trail registers” (trailjournals.com).

Thru-hiking by 2003 was well known and, as in the late seventies, there was again a surge of thru-hikers in the late 1990s and early 2000’s. This was due in large part to Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* (1998). When I was in thru-hiking in 2003, Bryson’s book was still a hot topic of discussion. Many hikers I ran into were entertained by the exaggerated characters in his book. Mary Ellen, for example, whom they met in the beginning of their hike, seemed too comical to be real. Bryson describes her as someone who “talked non-stop, except when she was clearing out her eustachian tubes (which she did frequently) by pinching her nose and blowing out with a series of violent and alarming snorts of a sort that would make a dog leave the sofa and get under a table in the next room” (Bryson 51). Many thru-hikers were also critical of Bryson’s thru-hike attempt (with his friend Katz) since he quit after only hiking 500 miles. The decision to quit was made in a Gatlinburg café. Bryson illustrate how this choice was made: “We went and got a cup of coffee and sat for some time in a kind of dumbfounded silence. All that we had experienced and done—all the effort and toil, the aches, the damp, the mountains, the horrible stodgy noodles, the blizzards, the dreary evenings with Mary Ellen, the endless, wearying, doggedly accumulated miles—all that came to two inches (on the A.T. map). My hair had grown more than that. One thing was obvious. We were never going to walk to Maine” (Bryson 105). Though Bryson barely made a dent in his thru-hike, he continued to explore the trail in sections and gives the reader a historical overview of key points on the trail. Bryson had done his wilderness research in writing the book and the reader is able to

get a glimpse of environmental issues facing the Appalachian Trail. Bryson's last words caused much discussion between thru-hikers: "We didn't walk 2,200 miles, it's true, but here's the thing: we tried. So Katz was right after all, and I don't care what anybody says. We hiked the Appalachian Trail" (Bryson 274). The fact that hikers were still passionate about the book five years after publication reveals the impact the book had on all who were lured to thru-hike. Though hikers disagreed on the merits of Bryson's book, everyone read it. The popularity of Bryson's book is due to his humorous portrayal of thru-hiking culture.

The charm of trail culture is that it does not have many of the social restrictions found in mainstream society. There are no rules for the way a hiker dresses. One aspect of the trail that was a pleasant surprise for me was the discovery of a significant amount of men wearing skirts. In fact it was stylish for men to do so as it signified the freedom from restraints found in society. It was an accepted practice among hikers and was never questioned within the trail culture. Male hiker FatCat gives other hikers advice in an online discussion on the best skirt to wear while hiking: "As I remember there were skirts from Mountain Hardwear that a ton of people were using in '03. I was going to get one, the weather went cold. I know a couple of guys who used them and used basically what Roadie described and it worked well. Just as long as it dries quickly and is light weight try it" (trailjournals.com). During my thru-hike I saw men who wore colorful, floral skirts. Many men welcomed this fashion style as it would not be deemed acceptable in everyday society.

Thru-hiker culture exists as a transient alternative to civilization. It is the condition of living in civilization that brings more of an appreciation and attraction to the outdoor landscape. Those who thru-hike enjoy the culture the trail offers. There



are very few rules on the trail. It is a simple pursuit filled with many social interactions with others. Hikers are bonded by a common experience with the understanding that they must return back to the everyday society, but they will do so rejuvenated.

However, they do personify Americans yearning to live a balanced life between the world of raw nature and an industrial setting. This outdoor experience is therefore used by Americans as an instrument of maintaining balance in order to better cope with the stress of urban living.

## Conclusion

This analysis has revealed a surprising consistency in hiker motivations and the core spirit of Trail Culture over the years. Current-day Americans still feel compelled to hike the Trail for very much the same reasons as the early hikers of the 1940s. For over 60 years, the Trail has served as a counterpoint and temporary retreat from an urban, consumer-focused society. The historical and cultural factors leading to the creation of the Appalachian Trail have set the stage for this remarkable phenomenon, which will likely continue for decades to come.

The key trends in hiker motivations are the desire to challenge oneself while practicing self improvement and to immerse oneself in a new environment where rules are limited. Hikers use the trail to better cope with major transitions in their life such as divorce, graduating from college, or losing a job. In addition to sharing common motivations and liminal circumstances, thru-hikers have also developed an exclusive culture. The A.T. culture values community support, freedom of expression, simplicity and honesty. There are many concepts in trail culture that would be considered foreign in mainstream society. The trail culture is not focused on appearances, since hikers go days and sometimes weeks without fully showering or washing their clothing. Trail culture depends on traveling with as little of possessions as possible. The less someone carries with them, the more successful they are in completing a thru hike. Hikers are not receiving money for anything and do not desire to seek out money.

Thru-hiking culture on the Appalachian Trail took on characteristics oppositional to the values of mainstream society. Instead of individuals' being out for themselves, the Trail supports a commune-like atmosphere where others are involved in your

success and well-being. The thru-hiker is propelled to reciprocate the kind acts commonly bestowed upon them while on the trail. The Appalachian Trail is a place where individuals can leave behind their old life and take on a new identity and existence. They are free to dress, speak and express themselves without the worry of breaking the rules of social norms set for them in conventional society. Though the hikers readily leave their old identities and values behind, they rigorously uphold the integrity of their new personae. People overall do not completely reject mainstream society, but are looking for alternative settings in dealing with life changes.

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