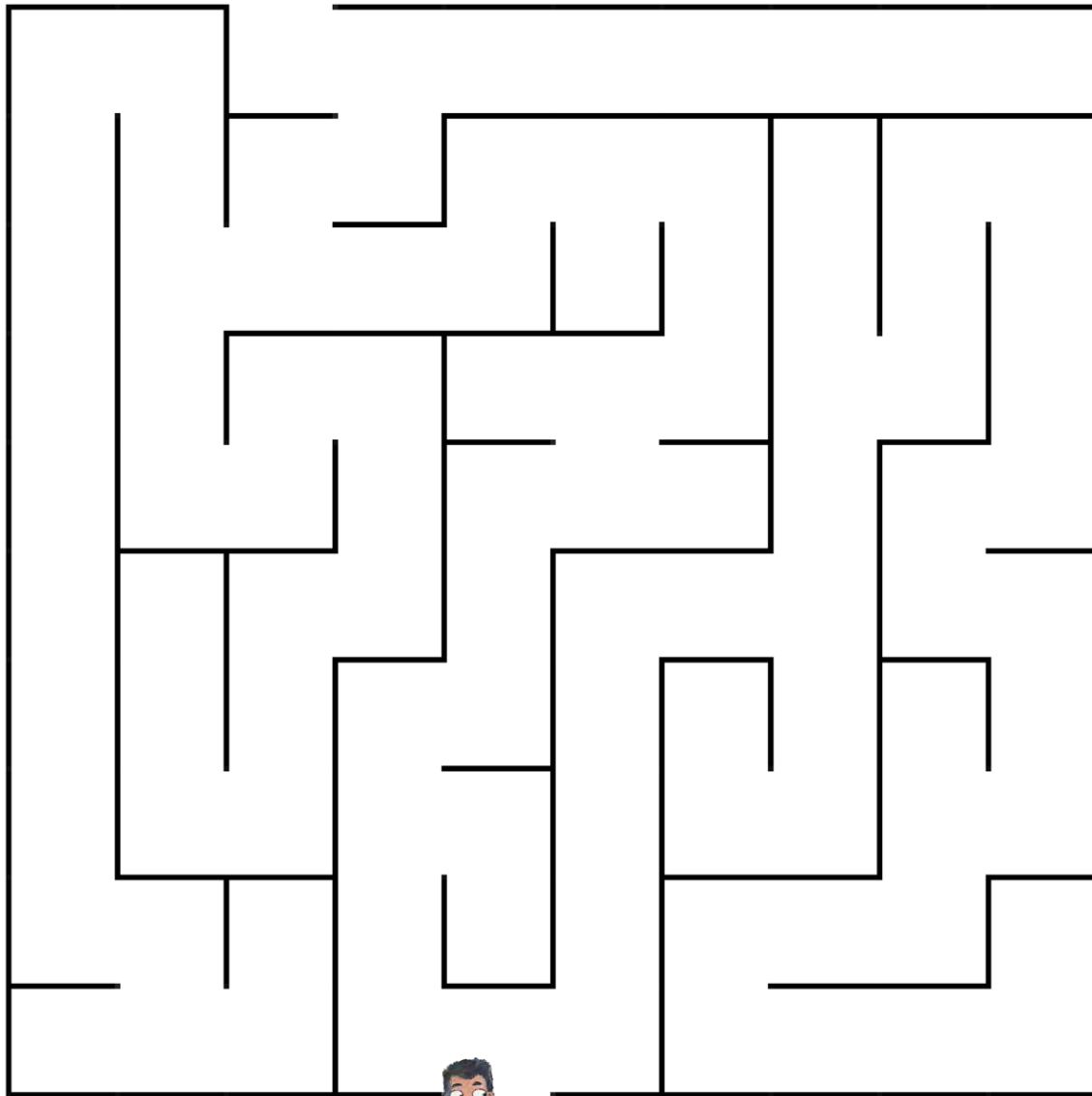




Hike the Appalachian Trail!



Earl Shaffer was the first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail in one hiking season—a feat that only 25 percent of hikers complete. Using a pencil, find your way through the Appalachian Trail. For an added challenge, time your way through the maze!



THE LONG HIKE
BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY

REPRODUCIBLE

Illustrations © 2026 by Meghan McCarthy



PACK YOUR BACKPACK!

More than three thousand hikers a year attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail, only packing their most essential items. If you decided to hike the Appalachian Trail, what would you carry in your backpack? Draw below!



THE LONG HIKE
BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY

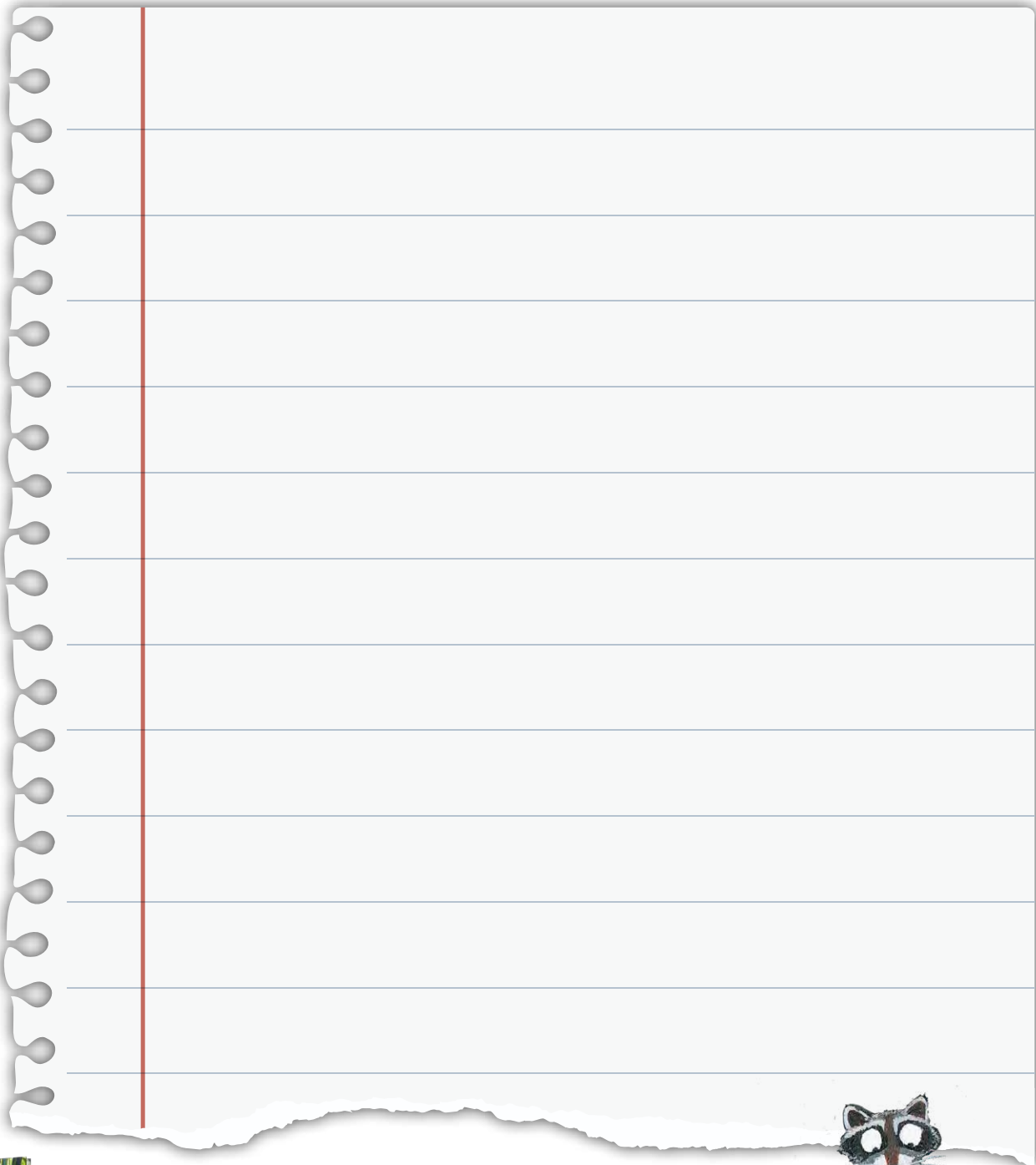
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WHO'S ALONG THE TRAIL?

On his hike, Earl saw many different animals and documented them in his little black book. As you read through his story, keep an eye out for any animals you see and write them down below!



THE LONG HIKE
BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY



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TRUE OR FALSE

1. The Appalachian Trail starts in Texas and ends in New Jersey.

True or False

2. Around the halfway point, at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, hikers are offered the challenge of eating a half gallon of ice cream. It can give them an upset stomach, but many think that's worth the risk.

True or False

3. New Jersey was the state Earl Shaffer disliked the most along the trail because it did not allow campfires. At night, the temperature would drop to 40 degrees and Earl had no fire to keep him warm.

True or False

4. In New Hampshire, Earl climbed over Mount Washington, which has the warmest weather in the country.

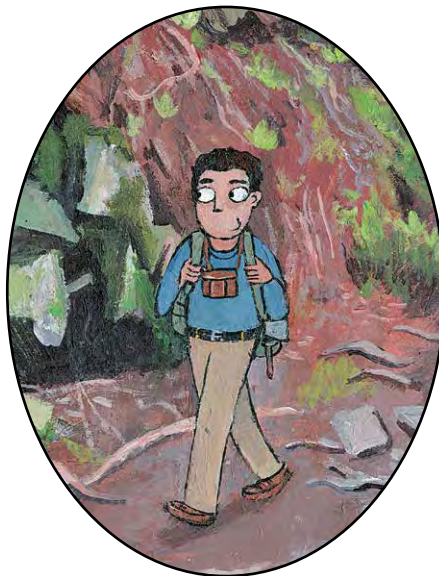
True or False

5. Earl Shaffer was the third person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail.

True or False

6. At nearly eighty years old, Earl Shaffer hiked the Appalachian Trail one last time. Despite his struggles, he broke another record and became the oldest Appalachian thru-hiker at the time.

True or False



THE LONG HIKE
BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY

ANSWER:
1. False, The Appalachian Trail starts in Georgia and ends in Maine.
2. True
3. True
4. False, Mount Washington has the most extreme weather in the country with a new low temperature recorded in 2023.
5. False, Earl Shaffer was the first person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail.
6. True





OUTDOOR OBSERVATIONS

Earl Shaffer wrote in his diary: *Took pic of curious clouds. Have seen several first looked like [football?] second was long line might be caused by plane at high altitude third looked like aircraft carrier fourth like elongated layer cake.*

In the boxes below, draw or color some different cloud shapes that you see.

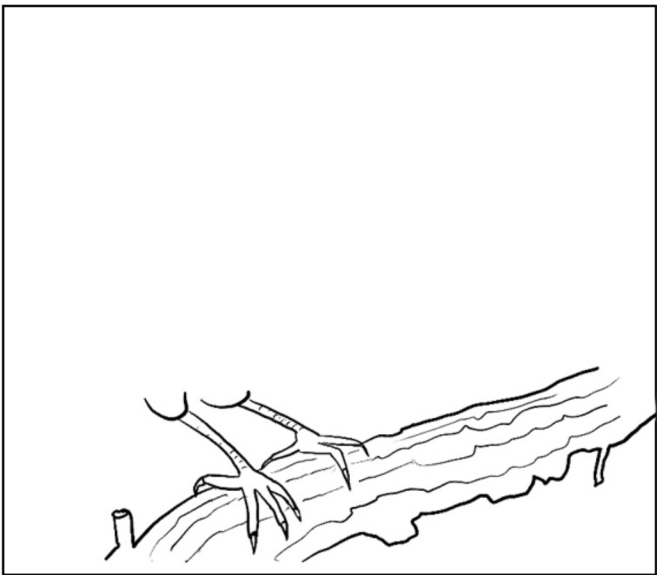
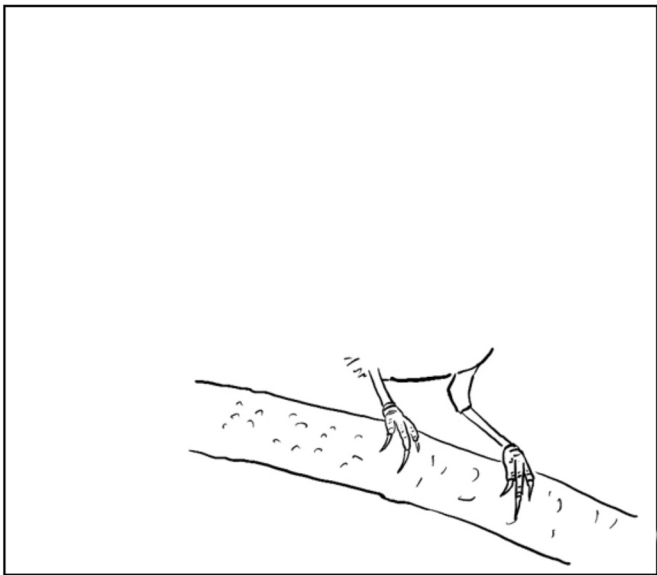
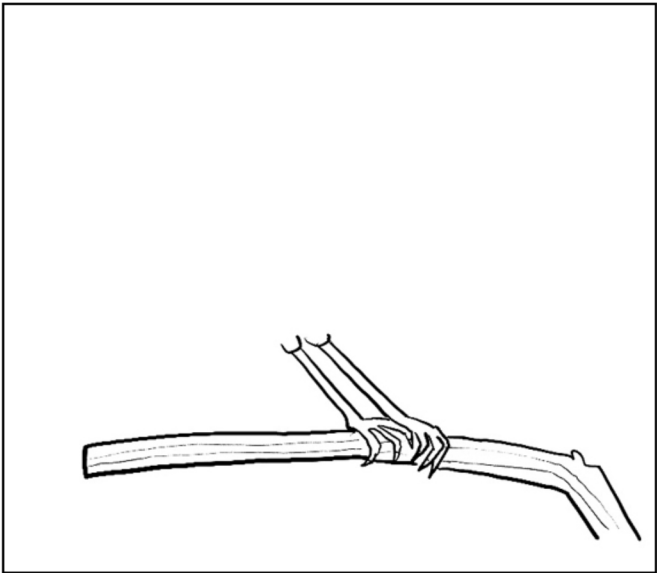
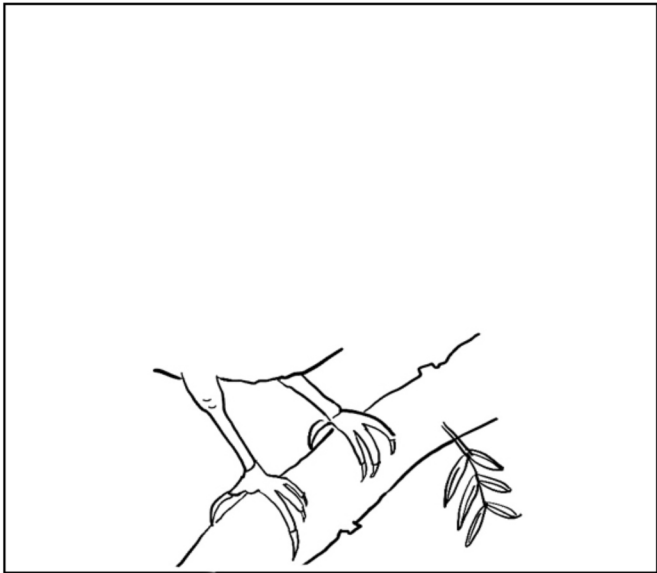




OUTDOOR OBSERVATIONS

Earl Shaffer wrote in his diary: *Songbirds sing sweetly... The warbling of a woodthrush warbles somewhere far below. The raucous calling of a fledgling crow waft upward.*

In the boxes below, draw different birds that you see or hear. What sounds do they make?



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Once the pandemic hit, I felt a burning desire to exit New York City and commune with nature. I needed a new book topic, and one about the Appalachian Trail seemed right. This is when I stumbled upon the story of Earl Shaffer. I was fascinated by the fact that Earl served in World War II. My grandfather was in the navy then, though he rarely talked about it and was depressed after the war, just as Earl seemed to be. Earl's brother John described Earl as "stubborn and tenacious." I think it takes those qualities to not only hike the entire Appalachian Trail (AT) in one go, but to also get the publicity required to designate oneself as "the first thru-hiker."

I loved Earl's little quirks, such as his penchant for sockless travel. Of course, after he hiked all of those miles sockless, his boots developed a pungent scent and remain that way to this day. "They are smelly," said one curator at the National Museum of American History. "Those cabinets are opened as little as possible." Earl also traveled with one change of clothes on his last hike. To keep somewhat clean, he would "find a stream, try to stay halfway civilized."

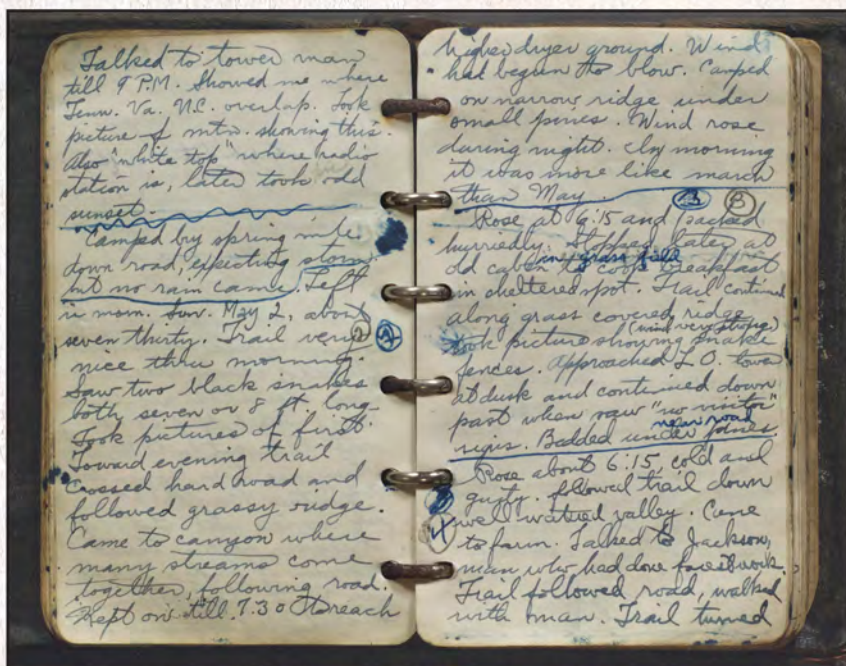
Earl's life was a simple one. For much of his life, he lived on a small homestead without running water, a refrigerator, a phone, or electricity. His home sat next to a meadow that kept his goats fed and happy, as well as a stream where berries grew along its bank. Earl enjoyed picking the berries and leaving them, along with other "garden goodies," as



View from Mt. Jefferson and Mt. Clay

a friend remembers, on neighbors' doorsteps. He was an antiques dealer, tinkered with Volkswagen buses, played folk tunes on his guitar, and wrote poetry.

During Earl's last AT hike, when he was seventy-nine, he complained that the trail had become more of a rigorous hike. In 1968, the land became federally protected, so portions of the trail were moved to go up mountain ridges for better views and to avoid roads and towns wherever possible. The AT eventually became over 158 miles longer. Shaffer remarked that the trail's relocation, making it subsequently more difficult to traverse, "missed the point." Earl added, "They call it a scenic trail, but you don't see a lot of scenery because you're staring



Earl's little black book

at your feet the whole way because of rocks." Many younger hikers would disagree, however, seeing the boulders and "scrambling" as a fun challenge.

Newspapers describe Earl as a "folk hero," and one said that he had a "cultlike following." Despite this, he seemed quite humble and spoke in a drawl. "I just like to walk in the woods and sleep on mountaintops," he said. "I haven't done anything anyone else couldn't do." Earl gave himself the trail name "The Crazy One," possibly for good reason. On his last hike, he refused to modernize his hiking equipment. He lugged around another WWII backpack that one

journalist said “looks like it should be in a museum,” but then added, “It fits him just fine.” Though Earl struggled on his 1998 hike, he amazingly finished without anything serious happening. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described a snapshot of Earl’s day:

He peeled off his 40-pound pack, gobbled four hard-boiled eggs and a package of 20 crackers, spooning jelly on each one or directly into his mouth. He unrolled his bedroll on the wooden floor and slept for three hours with his boots on.

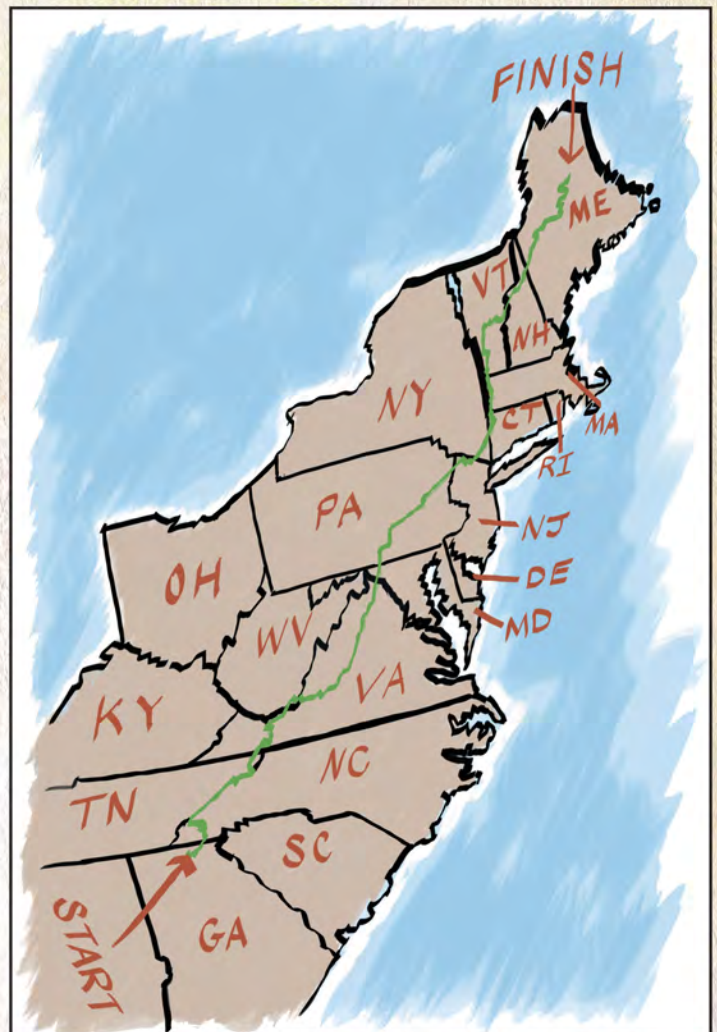
When Earl was asked if he’d hike the trail again, he said, “Ab-so-lute-ly not . . . It’s the fiftieth anniversary, and I couldn’t stay home. I had to.”

Earl passed away from cancer, with his friends and family by his side, at the age of eighty-three. The Earl Shaffer Foundation was founded the year of his death, to continue his legacy. You can read more about Earl at earlshaffer.com.

THE TRAIL TODAY (Twenty-First Century)

I’ve been aware of the Appalachian Trail since my dad section hiked the last 100 Miles in Maine, right around the time of Earl’s last hike. It was a big deal because back then, cell phones weren’t common, and there was no easy way for him to get help once entering the hundred miles. My dad said that at the time, the region was not only remote but depleted of modern civilization’s trappings. The area had no electricity in keeping with Baxter State Park’s namesake, who wanted the area to remain “forever wild.” My dad describes his hike as “tense” because it was so remote. He returned from his journey with stories of thru-hikers who wouldn’t let anything stop them from completing their trek. He stumbled upon an older woman whose face was entirely black and blue. She’d fallen on rocks but refused to relent to the pain. So she went to the ER, got her broken nose splinted, and then returned to the trail. Her face was harmed but not her spirit.

In the twenty years since both Earl’s last hike and my dad’s, equipment has gotten lighter and more advanced. Many hikers also now carry SOS emergency alert devices. Aside from more modernized equipment, little else has changed. By the time I got my contract for the Shaffer book, I’d been hiking bits and pieces of the AT wherever possible, to document it. When I was doing a school visit in West Virginia, I rented a car and took a detour on the way back to the DC airport. I drove to a beautiful part of Virginia that contained rolling green hills, sprinkled with farms. I got in a nice four-mile hike on the AT, which is, as many parts of the trail are, entirely plastered in rocks. While I was hiking at a good pace, a guy flew by me, all while carrying a huge backpack that looked at least fifty pounds. He stopped ahead of me, so when I caught up, we chatted a bit about the shoes hikers wear and even the knee injuries many have. Accompanying the hiker





Twister at Virginia/West Virginia line

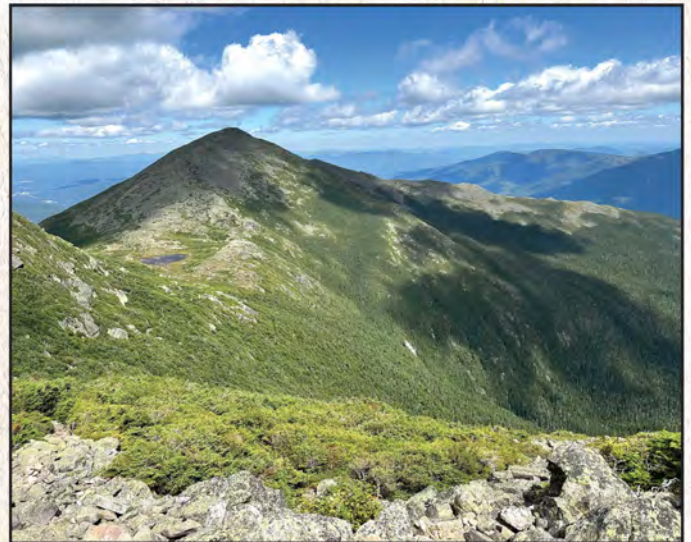
was a small dog, who also had her own backpack. As with all people who thru-hike the AT, this guy had a trail name, which was “Chowder.” His dog had a trail name too. “Twister,” he explained, “likes to go in circles.” His little dog carried her own food—about three days’ worth at a time.

Fast-forward to this summer, when I was doing a seven-mile hike on another portion of the AT, this time in New York. The sun was setting, and I had to get back to the car in time, before the woods enveloped me in complete darkness. I was flagged down by an older woman, who told me that she had just turned eighty. I said, “Wow, you don’t look it!” She told me that her knees were bothering her, but she was determined to trek on. She was looking for a water source. I told her that the only one I’d passed had turned into a muddy hole due to a lack of rainfall. Her trail name was “Grambo”—a combination of “Grandma” and “Rambo.” Her grandkids liked to check in on her progress. Instead of hiking the whole AT in one go, she was doing sections at a time, flying home, then flying back to her last end

point and resuming—a retirement hobby of sorts.

One of the biggest changes to the Appalachian Trail since Earl’s first hike in ’48 is the social aspect. There is a greater chance of encountering and even becoming best friends with fellow thru-hikers. The difference between the lone thru-hiker and one who eventually finds a group to hike with seems stark. The lone hike is a cerebral experience. I listened to one lone hiker talk about how emotional his lone hike was—that his brain had cycled through every past trauma he’d endured. His hike was a form of therapy. Those who hike in groups experience a community feel, and their hiking group becomes their “tramily.”

Whether you are hiking alone or in a group, it takes a lot of mental strength to endure the endless rocks,



View from Mt. Adams

the rain, the mud, the blisters, and the foot rot. Why people hike varies. Some just want the physical challenge, while others are trying to grapple with something gnawing at them. What Earl provided all of us is a gift for anyone seeking adventure—a unique and life-changing challenge.

TRAIL LINGO

Thru-hike: To hike the entire trail either southbound or northbound while only taking a day or two off here and there.

Zero day: To take a day off from hiking to recuperate, wash laundry, take a shower, and eat real food (sometimes).

On trail: Getting back on the trail and resuming the hike.

Trail magic: Food or drink, such as chips or soda, left free of charge for hikers to grab.

Trail angel: A person who leaves trail magic, helps hikers get to town and back, or allows hikers to stay in their house for free.

Blaze: A painted marker on trees and rocks to point hikers in the right direction to help them stay on trail.

White blaze: The AT uses white markings to direct hikers.

Tramily: “Trail family”—friends a hiker meets on the trail who become as close as family.

LNT (leave no trace): Not leaving wrappers, bottles, or even toilet paper behind on the trail.

Cairn: A stack of rocks to indicate which way to follow the trail, usually found above the tree line.

NOBO: Northbound hiking the AT—this is the traditional way to hike, as this is the way Earl first did it (from south, starting in Georgia, to north, ending in Maine).

SOBO: Southbound hiking the AT—from north, starting in Maine, to south, ending in Georgia.

Section hiker: A person who hikes sections of the AT.

Half-gallon ice-cream challenge: Around the halfway point, at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, hikers are offered the challenge of eating a half gallon of ice cream. It can give them an upset stomach, but many think that's worth the risk.

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