

Trail Stories

A compilation of short stories and reflections.

by Joe Barella

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Improvisation

Somewhere around 1980, before I owned anything other than a cheap summer sleeping bag, Pat let me off where I had ended a previous hike at Cornwall Bridge. The trail at that time ran along the Housatonic River for a few miles. It was a gorgeous fall day, the smell of tannin from the fallen leaves biting at my nostrils, the crunch of them under my feet. I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast at 6:30 am and we'd arrived at the bridge at eleven and I was excited to try out my new Peak 1 stove so I stopped near a little rill by the trail to heat up some soup even though it was still a little early (11:30am). I pumped up the stove and lit it and the surrounding leaves as it had leaked gas all over itself and surrounding 3 feet or so. Naturally, I turned off the stove and put it on a large rock where the remaining gas quickly burned off the sides of it. While this was going on, I stomped out the burning leaves. I had tried out the stove a couple of times at home and, in fact, had tightened the fitting because it had leaked before, so as per instructions that said the fitting might do this from expansion and contraction. (I must note here that the stove continued this behavior for the two or three years I used it and was a real pain in the ass until I stopped using it.) Anyway I tightened the fitting and had my soup then headed down the trail. The river sparkled, birds perched on every bush and the crunch of leaves under my feet made me feel like I was eight years old again without a care in the world. This trail was all new to me at the time and the few miles to Saint John's ledges went quickly. The climb up through the crevices in the ledges were exciting and I was quickly at the top. I found a nice step in the ledge to sit where I snacked and enjoyed the view and a nice breeze there. I had worked up a pretty good sweat on the climb up because it was quite warm by this time. Anyway, it was so pleasant sitting there near the edge with its cool breeze, I found it hard to leave. I finally got up the energy to get up and hike across a paved road and into Macedonia Park. While I had heard of it, I had never been there before. The trail entered from the north through large fields and there was a fair sized pond on the west side of one of them. The trail now ran along the park road and there was a pretty stream running along the west side. There were picnic tables on both sides and eventually a bridge where the stream crossed over to the other side. The fields now had become shady patches of green as the orange and red of the hardwood trees closed in. The road which had been a slight downgrade now became steeper and winded its way through a thick conifer forest. The stream plunged into ledgy pools after very pretty falls. I was in absolute awe. Now thirty something years later it's still stands out in my mind. I climbed down to one of the pools to retrieve a baseball sized piece of slag I'd spotted from above. The colors, smoothness and shape made it stand out from the stones. I was aware that they had mined iron ore in the area long ago. I had in fact noticed the very flat, walled road off to the west of the park road. I reasoned that it must have been for something very important because the stone walled sides were very well done and some areas eight feet high. As I walked along, houses started appearing as the road leveled. Most were small almost cottage-like and very well kept. I didn't know how far I'd hiked but my legs and feet told me they'd had enough by the time the trail turned into the woods on the right side of the road. I thought of that field with the pond I passed on my way into the park which was less than three miles back so I turned and headed that way. In spite of being bone tired, the trip back was enjoyable because of the beauty of

the area. By the time I got back to that field and setup my tent overlooking the pond, the sun was low in the west. The already dotted with geese pond was now a landing strip for new arrivals. While I gazed trance-like at the scene before me, the sun at once dipped beneath the treetops, and the din at the pond stopped, the cold I felt snapped me out of my trance. The temperature had dropped like a stone and it dawned on me that the t-shirt, light sweatshirt, and unlined windbreaker, were marginal at best, and the summer sleeping bag I had definitely were not up to the task. There were lots of fallen leaves in the field so I started gathering handfuls and throwing them into the tent, but it was a painfully slow process. Then I saw a small depression under a large maple tree where the wind had blown leaves about a foot thick. I now was able to take armfuls to the tent. In about a dozen trips the tent was filled almost to the peak. After tying the door flap, I felt around for the sleeping bag opening and crawled in. I was shivering but after ten minutes or so I could feel the heat building up and was soon asleep. Unfortunately, somewhere around the middle of the night I woke up with the urge to pee. I lay there reluctant to leave my now toasty nest. Finally, afraid I would pee my pants, I opened the flaps and burst into the cold night air. The first thing I did was pee, but as I was doing so I took in the scene around me. The moon had risen, the grass now frosty white glistened in the moon light. The blackness of the pond now with an elongated reflection of the moon on it. Now it was damned cold (when I got home the next day I found the low for the area was 6 degrees), but I stayed out there with my eyes taking it all in until I couldn't stand any more cold. My nest had lost much of its warmth but it wasn't cold so I was soon asleep. When I awoke again it was light out but very cold so I laid there for an hour or so until I just had to get up. It was still quite cold so I quickly pulled out my sleeping bag and took down the tent, dumping the leaves out of both, stuffing my tent into my pack which I put on. I then threw the opened sleeping bag over the pack and wrapped the ends around me and headed down into the park. After a mile or so I took it off and put it into my pack. I was still cold but walking and holding that sleeping bag around me was a real pain. Anyway, I had warmed up a little. I walked the last couple of miles to the point where the trail turned into the woods and by that time it had warmed up considerably. Shortly after the trail entered the woods, it ran into an old logging road, turning onto it and following it up a slight grade. The road was soft and springy with pine needles and made my tired legs and feet feel great. Another boost came in the form of a shelter where I stopped and ate most of what was left of my food (a crushed PBJ sandwich and a trail bar). With food in my belly, rest, and the temperature now around 50 degrees I felt great. On the wall of the shelter was a map that showed me I wasn't far from the peak of Algo Mountain. I put my pack on and was soon at the top where the trail turned to the southeast, eventually coming out on Schaghticoke Road. It felt good going down the mountain side then onto a flat dirt road because my legs were weakening from the mileage I'd already done. It was just woods on both sides of the road until I came to a fenced grassy area. It turned out to be a cemetery. I walked into it, befuddled by the sight in front of me. All of the stones were just that... stones, except for one small headstone that was about two feet high with a gently rounded top and eighteen inches wide. On it in small very weather-worn letters was Princess Eunice Maui - 106 years old. I now understood those irregularly shaped stones probably represented different people that had died in a culture that didn't read or write. The special status of Princess Maui was recognized by the tribe buying a

stone for her. As I looked beyond the cemetery I could see a pavilion, so I walked over to it and read the sign on the front - "Tribal Council". I had been aware of the Schagticokes only from news articles about land disputes. I walked a short distance back to the cemetery. There was a quiet dignity about it, the unpainted fence, the odd shaped stones, and that one very small, special weathered stone. I mention this again because several years ago I drove to the cemetery and to my great surprise and horror there were now about a dozen polished granite stones, one engraved with a scene of horses with flying manes. All of these new stones were beautifully done but in my mind out of place and garish. (The Schagticokes were not plains Indians and to portray them in this way is an insult to their ancestors). Anyway, I finally put on my pack and was on my way. After a half mile or so the mountainside on the right squeezed its way towards the roadside and the Housatonic River on my left came into view. A few small houses along with a very large beamed structure came into my view along a hill on the mountains edge. (I still don't know what the beam structure represented.) In the driveway of one of the houses was a Schagticoke lady who waved at me as I passed. I got so excited about seeing a genuine Indian and her waving made it even better. As I walked farther down the road, the mountain and the river squeezed the road even more, and now there were vertical cliffs rising a hundred feet or so in places. It was ruggedly spectacular. I had never in my wildest dreams expected something this inspiring. As the roadsides opened up, I noticed the river on my right had changed from the wide fast flowing river to a smaller almost swamp-like river. I learned later that the Housatonic splits for a mile or so. I envisioned Schagticokes placing fish traps and hunting there in my mind. In a short time, I came to Bulls Bridge Road and for the first time in a while actually knew where I was. I walked over the covered bridge to a convenience store across the road and called Pat from a telephone there. The store had great grinders there so my wait for Pat was enjoyable.

Backpacked Trails

Mohawk, Mattatuck, Monadnock-Metacomet, Tunxis, Taconic, Appalachian and a few others

Some of my first backpacking trips started on the Mohawk Trail that starts in the Mohawk Forest in Connecticut and connected with the Appalachian Trail on the top of Bunker Hill. Much of this changed when a tornado destroyed Cathedral Pines, a particularly beautiful section. (People were sometimes married there.) Anyway at the time the A.T. went from the top of Bunker Hill where there were three shelters within a two mile stretch, sixteen miles north to Falls Village. via music and Barrack mountains. The trail 9 miles south from the top of Bunker Hill went to Cornwall via Cathedral Pines, Dark Entry, and Dudley Town. Bunker Hill was only twenty miles from home and would eventually contact me with places like Salisbury to the north and Kent to the South. Since my time was limited to an occasional two or three day trip it took a few years to drive any farther away. Instead it made more sense to backpack the Tunxis or Mattatuck which were much closer to home.

I had been interested in the Mattatuck for quite some time, being able to see the signs on the road crossings on old route 8. I knew it went through Black Rock Park in Thomaston and ended in Whites Woods in Bantam and started in Waterville. I had viewed the mountains next to old route eight in Waterville from the highway (the new route 8) and was impressed. Finally I had three days off so Pat left me off in Waterville on old route eight. The trail started very steeply at the edge of old route eight, eased a little along a little stream. I was amazed at how pretty it was being so close to a city like Waterbury at first, then I noticed old tires and other junk in the stream. Soon I was along a Macadam Road and I understood where the junk came from. At this point there was an incredibly beautiful falls in the stream and a very nice picnic area in the grove of hemlock. It had two picnic tables so I stopped for a bite to eat. As I surveyed the area I was both exhilarated and saddened by what I saw. The area was so beautiful but what had been done to it was sickening. There was an old rotting sleeping bag surrounded by crushed beer cans, beer cartons, bottles and other assorted trash. I was too sad to be angry.

The Tunxis trail being less than two miles from our house was surely a must for me. To the south it goes as far as West Peak in Meriden. I had day hiked a section from route 202 to the Farmington River quite a few times before I got a chance to backpack it. When I did finally backpack it I started from home, walking the two miles of 202 to the trail crossing. It seemed strange at first being so close to home and on familiar ground, but after crossing the Farmington it was all new after a mile or so. Once I got off the dirt road that runs along the east side of the Farmington the trail gets fairly rough. It eventually runs past an abandoned summer camp with a fair sized pond. I needed water so I filled up there since it's spring fed and icy cold. I attempted to go for a swim there but was back out in less than a minute shivering, in spite of it being a very warm day. I suspect the water temperature led to the demise of the Camp. Before I went along my way I walked over to the outlet where there were a half dozen trout in the crystal clear water. I thought of tenting nearby but it was still early and I was rested with my little break there. Soon after hiking through a very nice tenting area I came to Ratlum Road and knew if I kept going there would be some climbs and I was tiring so I

backtracked to the nice area and set up my tent. I'd had enough for the day. I'd picked well because it was very comfortable there, soft and quiet so I slept well and was up early, excited about going over the mountains along Compensating Reservoir (now Lake McDonough). Looking back after thousands of miles of hiking they look so tiny to me but at the time I huffed and puffed my way up to the first overlook. It was so beautiful looking down at the lake. After that initial climb the trail is relatively flat, just little ups and downs.

Cornwall Bridge South to the Hudson

Before going any further I must explain that the trail when these hikes occurred went through Macedonia State Park and has since been rerouted through Caleb's Peak.

Pat left me off Cornwall Bridge on a warm autumn day. I had already done the section from Cornwall Bridge to Macedonia State Park but I knew I'd enjoy crunching through the fall leaves on the dirt road along the Housatonic. I'd also enjoyed the climb up St. John's Ledges and Macedonia State Park. Though it was overcast it didn't rain so the leaves were crisp and crunchy. By the time I reached the ledges it was quite warm so the climb up was a sweaty one, but there was a pretty good breeze at the top.

When I went through the park I made use of one of the picnic tables for lunch. Halfway between the Park and Mt. Algo I met a young emaciated deer. She walked almost up to me from the opposite direction and stood there in the middle of the trail trembling. I just stood my ground and talked quietly to her. After a couple minutes she walked off into the trees. I wondered if she might have Lyme Disease. There were people at Algo so I went on to a great tent site near Thyer Brook. Thirteen miles.

I'm glad I had picked that site yesterday because I was able to bathe pretty well in a little pool that was fairly deep. Between being clean and refreshed and the quiet there I slept really well, I really enjoyed Schaghticoke Mountain where I got to see a beautiful Barred Owl. I'm excited to be in tNew York at Wiley Shelter now. Only eleven miles but it's ups and downs were steep, and if I went on I don't know how far it would be to another tent site. Anyway it is kind of nice not having to set up my tent and it looks like rain soon so it'll be nice to be in a shelter.

It was comfortable hiking today because of all the road crossings that I recognized and all the open fields. I've driven all these roads and actually knew where I was all the time. The last three miles here after route 55 were difficult because I was out of water and didn't know when I'd find any. I was so happy to find Morgan Shelter and its well. I did sixteen miles today which is pretty close to all I can handle now. This is a nice looking shelter and I am very comfortable here.

Got here to Ralphy's Peak Hiker's Cabin after very exciting day. There's beds, an outhouse, and a well with very rusty water. (I went back for water to a little rill 300 feet north of here). I found out there's a store only a mile away so I'll be able to call Pat tomorrow to pick me up. In the meantime I'm comfortable here reading the register. There's also a pretty good collection of magazines here.

I woke early and got to the store around eight and had to wait a half hour till it opened. I called Pat and she's on her way. I enjoyed yesterday's hike because I got to see six deer and also enjoyed the climbs. Though not super steep they were challenging and long. I would like to hike a little farther but have to be back to work tomorrow.

Pat left me off on the Taconic State Parkway near Ralph's Peak Hiker Cabin at around two so I got a real late start. I loved Shenandoah Mountain but it seems to be a strange name for a New York mountain. I would loved to have taken a swim in the Canopus Lake in Fahnstock Park but the frail sides of the lake has very high steep

banks making it inaccessible. I'm camped near Sunk Mine Road among very tall hemlocks and its quite pretty if a little dark. I would have preferred an open area like the top of Shenandoah but daylight's going fast so this is home for now.

Made it to Bear Mountain Bridge and thought of crossing but my goal was the Hudson River for now. I saw this spot (Hemlock Springs) on my way to the Hudson and I liked it so I hiked the mile and a quarter back here. I don't know how far I hiked today but I think its the most ever and I'm pretty whipped. I have a nice campfire and it seemed to get rid of the bugs.

I'm heading back north to Ralph's Peak Hikers Cabin so Pat can pick me up in a couple days. I headed right back here to the top of Shenandoah Mountain. I'm sitting here on the ledges on top and my tent is on a nice flat grassy spot nearby. It feels so good here with a nice breeze and a great sunset. Its only a few miles to the cabin so I won't have to rush, she's not coming until ten or eleven. I enjoyed this section and look forward to doing it again.

On the way back home from this trip, we bought my first Appalachian Trail databook making my hiking on the A.T. easier since I will know distances to shelters and water. While I never actually planned my days it was nice knowing what and how far things were on the trail ahead.

Evolution

In order to better understand my logs I'll try to explain the evolution of my hiking. What I got started with in both ideas and gear. My gear, in the beginning, consisted of castoffs from the kids. An old pack made for someone a foot shorter than me, a kids mountain tent and miscellaneous cooking utensils. As time went by, I did however, buy a Peak One stove which I eventually abandoned because its fittings would loosen up spewing gas around and creating hazardous conditions. They did provide a little wrench to tighten these fittings so I'm sure they were aware of the problem. In fact I seem to remember something in the directions about fittings needing occasional tightening because of the expansion and contraction of heating and cooling. Anyway, I replaced it with a little pellet stove that weighed about one-fifth as much and with its small pot took 1/5th as much room. This worked well and I used it for many years. Its two drawbacks were difficulty in obtaining pellets and the small capacity of the pot, but the lightweight and ease of operation made it a plus. My other purchase was a Bigfoot Zero Degree sleeping bag, which I still have and use today. It's one helluva piece of equipment. It's a little heavy at seven pounds but the pluses make that insignificant. If it gets wet it will dry out easily just from body heat. I've slept in it comfortably down to minus fifteen degrees clothed and with extra socks.

For clothing I normally carried one insulated, hooded jacket, a down vest, one sweatshirt, two pairs of shorts (with silky not mesh liners), four pairs of cotton socks plus one heavy pair, one hooded rain jacket, a pair of nylon pants and three tee-shirts. This list includes what I might be wearing at the time. Shorts, socks and tee-shirts would be rinsed out every day and body dried if necessary in cold weather. (I always seem to have enough body heat in my big foot bag to dry small items and keep my water bottle unfrozen).

I also carried a worn hand towel which doubled as a kind of turban in cold weather along with toothbrush, comb, etc....

My footwear stayed pretty much the same for years. Lightweight hikers (glorified sneakers) and another even cheaper pair of sneakers for camp shoes. I have great disdain for hiking boots, as I have witnessed many blistered hikers in them. In an estimated twenty thousand miles of backpacking I had only one blister which I quickly alleviated by cutting the offending part of my sneaker out with my trusty utility knife.

Before my second thru hike I purchased a Bivy tent which I still use occasionally. I also purchased a Jansport pack at the same time that has a great waist belt which supports most of the pack weight comfortably on my hips. On my third thru hike I broke some of the ribs and called Jansport. I then shipped it to Jansport and they air mailed me a new one right away - no charge. A few weeks earlier I'd met a young hiker near Port Clinton who hiked in sandals, my first thought was that he was crazy, but when I asked him why he wore them, his reply was, "The Roman Army conquered the world in sandals." It wasn't long after that I bought my first pair of Tivas. From the first day on I alternated between sandals and sneakers every day, using the sandals for longer periods than the sneakers. My feet were much better because of all the open air they

got. I'd did get a little sunburn the first time without socks but once my feet were tanned they were fine.

That first hike in '85 with my undersized pack, I carried everything very high on my body making me somewhat top heavy. I also hiked quite fast resulting in some unusual events. Every so often while cruising down the trail a stick would get caught in the laces of my shoes without me knowing it. When I attempted to move this foot forward the other end would dip down into the dirt preventing the forward movement of my back foot. The end result would be a complete flip. I was amazed the first time it happened but it happened a dozen times in a period of a month and since I hadn't been injured I got a lot of laughs out of the phenomena even grading my flips in my mind. I thought some were more artful than others. Luckily nobody was ever around when it happened so I didn't get embarrassed. Eventually I changed the way I attached my sleeping bag and tent to my pack, lowering my center of gravity and maybe slowing down a bit because it stopped happening.

Before my 1995 thru hike I did buy an MSR butane stove and a very light aluminum pot which worked well enough but had the same draw backs as my pellet stove, availability of fuel. I solved the problems for three or four hundred miles by adapting a propane bottle that was left in the "hiker bin" at one of the hostels. Now I did this with the aid of a small piece of twig, some parachute cord and some tubing from my water filter. It worked like a charm and I loved the reaction from other hikers who saw me using it. Some were amazed and even started calling me McGuiver and a very few who thought it was crazy and it was unsafe. I had tested my little conversion kit while I was alone one day in a nice open area and I knew it was one helluva lot safer than my old Peak One. Eventually I emptied the cylinder and since by this time it was quite warm out and I didn't really need hot food, I left my stove at home when Pat picked me up for a few days. I did however keep my little pot and employed another of my tricks. I had found that if I took a couple of handfuls of twigs and placed them in a crevice between two rocks I could have a boiling pot full of water in less than fifteen minutes. The most efficient seemed to be a dead hemlock or pine branch broken up into four inch pieces. This technique also worked well and the fuel would be used and cold by the time I finished my hot food. As summer progressed my diet changed. My main stays were bagels, peanut butter, and jam that I took from the glass jars and put into plastic peanut butter jars I'd saved for that purpose. From West Virginia on, Ramen noodles, freeze-dried soups, etc... disappeared from my menu.

Sounds

As I was hiking north in April and early May I would come upon a cacophony of shrieks from the trail ahead. As I neared the sound it would abruptly stop as if it were shut with a switch, then I would see the vernal pool it came from and realize it was just frogs, but they were never visible. As I walked down the trail at around three hundred feet away the din would resume. Not gradually, but at full blast. Something like switching on a radio when the volume was as high as it will go. This fascinated me so much I took off my pack and crept quietly back towards the pool hoping to see the frogs, but even this got me no closer. As before it was like switching the power on and off on a radio or TV set on full blast. Finally I ambled down the trail awed by how well nature had prepared them for survival even at breeding time.

Living on a farm I had grown up listening to the sound of Whippoorwills in our meadows and orchards and was often lulled to sleep by it, but never had any idea of what it sounded like up close until my thru hike in '85. For some reason they seem to like the peaks of AT shelters or nearby trees to perch on between one and three a.m. and do their shtick. Their raucous cries at two a.m. are maddening, in fact the first time it happened it took me a while to recognize what it was. In a period of two weeks it happened at four different shelters and that was it. My suspicion is that mating season was over but it could be I had moved out of their territory.

One of my pleasant nights of sounds occurred in Massachusetts just north of Dalton I'd set up my tent just off the trail in a heavily wooded area and despite being tired after a long day of hiking I was so keyed up I put my pillow just outside the tent door and laid there looking up at the moonlit treetops. In the distance two owls seemed to be singing a duet, in another direction I could faintly hear a screech owl working his way around a pond. (I'd witnessed this occurring at a pond near home several times.) The canopy over my head was alive with flying squirrels and I could hear twigs dropping softly from their antics. I don't really know how long I lay there awake but it was so wonderful I drifted off to sleep.

In '97 on my only North to South hike I found a mossy niche in a dense grove barely big enough for my tent. I'd hiked all the way from the road to Rangeley, right around thirty miles. I'd planned on staying at Hall Mountain Lean-to but upon seeing a motley crew of weekenders there I decided against it. (I'm a bit of a snob sometimes.) The sight was perfect, as the moss was thick, dry, and soft. Dark came quickly as I'd gotten there at dusk. Soon there was the beautiful sound of coyotes that seemed to be around a quarter of a mile away. I was loving every minute of it even though they seemed to be getting closer and closer. Now I've never been very intimidated by animals but by the time they seemed to be a hundred yards away I thought it was prudent to let them know I was there. I let out a big howl mimicking them as best as I could. It must not have been too Coyote like because that's the last I heard from them.

I must explain that that year I had flip flopped starting from Vermont in early April and hiking as far south as Atkins Virginia, coming home from my grandson Tim's graduation, then to Katahdin south to the point in Vermont where I started, after which I took a bus back to Atkins to continue my southbound journey. By this it was already late

June and quite warm in the south I mention this because I have never encountered the phenomena I was about to experience before. It didn't occur right away, only after I went further south and then only four or five locations when I would tent in wooded areas. I am pretty much at a loss to describe the sound, other than deafening. The call of the tree frog envelopes you in a kind of nightmarish hell. There is no hope of sleep or that it will stop until the sun peaks over the horizon, and then and only then every single frog stops at the exact instant. I do carry earplugs and while there pretty effective with snoring hikers, they are not of much value with tree frogs.

Vermont 9 to Peru – (Thirst)

Between both Pat and I both working overtime and also both helping Catherine by looking after my bed-ridden mother when we could, plus taking care of our own family and house I was in dire need of some outlet. My mother had been in (can go anytime) condition for eight months at the time and I just had to get away. My mother was pretty much comatose all this time anyway.

I loaded up my pack and Pat drove me to Bennington, Vermont. We had a nice breakfast there before she left me off where the trail crossed route 9, and my last hike ended. I'd brought a quart of water from home which I thought was enough for a start. The trail from there rises very steeply and it was a warm day so by the time I'd hiked a quarter of a mile I was already sweating profusely. By the time I reached the top and Melville Nauman Shelter a mile and a quarter later, over half of my water was gone. The water source at the shelter was pretty much dry, but I figured there'd be some on the trail soon. The trail from there on was fairly flat but being very warm out my water was soon gone. There was a small swampy stream along the trail at one point but I didn't own a filter and it just didn't look good. By the time I reached the bottom of Little Pond Mountain with its wooden stairs embedded in the mountain side I was thirsty, tired and disheartened (I later heard they called this area, "Mountain of a Thousand Stairs"). It was already late afternoon and I had little left, but I went on... and on... and on until I finally had nothing left. There was still a little daylight left but I couldn't take another step. I setup my tent right there on the flattest place I could find. I was so tired that even thirst couldn't keep me awake. My muscles were so sore that I woke often to find a spot that didn't ache. Finally it started raining and I quickly laid out my ground sheet to collect some rain. It didn't rain very hard or long but I managed to get a couple mouthfuls and I slept a little better, after what seemed like forever it got light enough for me to break camp. I was so thirsty, I had to get water soon, so I put on my pack and walked 200 hundred feet up the trail and couldn't believe my eyes, there was the most beautiful spring with wonderful ice-cold water. I drank my fill and filled up my water bottles and then hiked up the trail another 300 hundred feet and there was a shelter (Glastenbury Shelter at the time). Instead of spending a night of abject misery, all the comforts were within 500 feet of my tent. After heating up some soup and eating some gorp and resting there, I felt good enough to snicker at myself and was soon down the trail towards the nearby fire tower (gone now) which I climbed. Now the view while not bad, was just treetops in every direction. About a mile past the tower the terrain changed to a spongy subalpine area with lots of little rills running through. It was the first time I'd seen anything like it and I fell in love with the area. The trail then got quite rough and twisted until Caughnawawa Shelter which while very ugly has become one of my favorites. There's a great water source there for both drinking and bathing. At noon I stopped at Story Spring Shelter, ate and filled up my water bottle at the excellent spring there. I went on to Stratton pond where I stayed at Vondell Shelter. The whole area near Stratton is very wet and has miles of bog bridges which make for very easy hiking. Probably lucky for me because I'd developed a blister on my right heel. I solved the problem by cutting a hole in my sneaker where the offending area was rubbing. I had a great swim in the pond and then had a small campfire in the fire ring near the shelter. It was very comforting since it was now dusk with a light rain and I'd lost most of my body heat. I slept really good at Vondell and awoke feeling very rested if a little stiff. I packed up and started hiking on bog bridges, then fairly gentle terrain. After that I climbed to

Spruce Peak which was very pretty and not too difficult. The shelter there is actually a cabin and I thought I'd like to stay there sometime. The hiking after that was little ups and downs until Vermont Eleven and then Bromley Mountain. It's a pretty good sized mountain but the trail along a little brook is pretty easy. The miles flew by and I was soon on the peak. The views from a wooden platform near the ski lift were great so I had some snacks there before going on. I knew there was a shelter near from a map posted on the side of the platform and it was only a mile away. After spending an hour or so on Bromley I went on to Mad Tom Shelter and found the view there from the open side equally spectacular. By this time it was close to sunset, so after laying out my sleeping bag I just sat there at the edge of the shelter with my legs dangling over the edge of the shelter enjoying the sunset. When dark came I crawled into my bag and drifted off. When I awoke in the morning it was beautiful there, but it was time to hike the two miles north to US FS 21 which would bring me into Peru, VT in another four and a half miles. I did a lot of thinking in that six and a half miles about my disastrous start a few days ago and how wonderful it turned out. After calling Pat from the general store in Peru I bought an ice cream bar and some candy bars to munch on while I waited for Pat. Lying next to the road amidst goldenrod and New England asters occasionally munching on a candy bar in the warm autumn sun.

The Captain—1990

During my 1990 thru-hike, I arrived at Morgan Stewart shelter a few miles south of N.Y. 55 at mid- afternoon. After laying out my sleeping bag and hanging my food bag, I went to get water and wash up at the well which was a quarter of a mile away. I spent about 15 minutes there rinsing off the sweat and then filling my bottles with water dipped from the well. As I was returning to the shelter, a figure emerged from the woods on the trail I'd originally come in on. I was dumb and speechless by the apparition in front of me. He was a young man in his late 20's or early 30's, over six feet tall and very thin. Sticking out on both of his shoulders was a very wide sheaf containing his bedroll and whatever he'd been using for shelter. It could have been a tent or just a tarp. We exchanged greetings and I directed him to the well. All this time I couldn't help but think to myself, "Ichabod Crane is alive and well." When he came back from the well, he reached into this sheath and pulled out a package with a few rice cakes in it and wolfed them down. My first thought was to give him what was left in my food bag, but then I remembered seeing a row of cans on a back shelf of the shelter. I'd looked at them when I came in and speculated that there must have been a troop of scouts there recently and they didn't want to carry them out. There were eight cans there but I don't know what every one of them contained, only that one contained corn and one string beans and after seeing that, I lost interest. When he saw them, his eyes lit up and he asked if I had a can opener. I said I didn't, so he frantically searched the shelter, finally finding a loose, bent, #10 nail that with some effort he was able to pull from the wall. After straightening this nail with a rock, he took these primitive tools and proceeded to open one of the cans and devour its contents. We talked for a while before he went on to can number two with his rock and nail. This went on until all eight cans were eaten and it was dark. We continued talking for over an hour more discussing many subjects and I could tell I was in the company of someone much brighter than myself but also very "eccentric." Our range of discussion was varied, including that he'd been a scout and a scout master and he came from somewhere in New York City.

Then he dropped a bomb. He asked me if I remembered the grounding of the Exxon Valdez and when I replied yes, he calmly told me he thought Joseph Hazelwood (Captain of the Valdez) was his father. When he said it, I could tell he really believed it. Before this, I believed I was sharing a shelter with somebody a little odd but now I knew I was in the company of someone very strange indeed. I'd seen him open all those cans with a rock and a rusty nail and now he'd be nearby while I slept. While the thought of it wasn't exactly comforting, I was able to sleep a little but was relieved when morning came. I quietly packed and tried to sneak off but he woke and asked if he could hike with me. I couldn't say no and we were soon down the trail together. We actually had a pleasant running conversation while we hiked but I just had to find a way to get rid of him without crushing his feelings. Finally, after 8 miles when we got near Pawling, I told him I had to walk into town and meet my wife at the grocery there. I don't know whether he bought it or not, but after a while or so I headed down the trail and never saw him again.

The Spunks

I met the Spunks on April third at Neels Gap where they shared a cabin with me. They were four likeable, impish, well heeled college kids (two of them brothers) from Yardley, Pennsylvania. They had been joined by a very similar Georgia boy by the trail name of Ricki Ticki Tavi.

Their first names aren't important, because they soon went by the trail names of Spunk One or Spunk Two, etc. In the beginning I didn't actually hike with them at all but because our paces were very similar we often shared a shelter. This was both a good thing and a bad thing. The good was their hijinks were hilarious. For example when one of the brothers thought he had Giardia and took Lomotil for it and suffered the consequences. While his discomfort may not have been funny, his brother and the rest of the Spunks thought it was hilarious and in spite of his stomach cramps he took it all with a smile.

They were definitely the most successful food beggars on the trail and could often be seen sitting at a table with picnicking tourists. They also had a penchant for hitching into bars when we crossed roads. This led to a little friction within the group so two of them hiked with me for a while until they went home to Yardley for a couple days and eventually went back to the original group.

My favorite hijinx of them all was when they encountered a troop of boy scouts at Birch Run Shelters. Now the Spunks had had a long tough day and even though there are multiple shelters there was no space left for them. They didn't say a word to any of the scouts or leaders but set up their tents a half mile away. After washing and eating they hatched the plan. They were inspired by the movie Rambo and after the boy scouts became quiet the Spunks blackened their faces with mud and stealthily made their way into the campsite and rifled through packs taking everything edible, especially candy, cookies, cocoa, etc., leaving only a loaf of bread and some water and a note saying a good scout should be able to live on bread and water. Needless to say they were up early in the morning and out of there heading north at dawn.

They were lucky enough once to get to a Church-sponsored ham dinner just as it was about to close and ended up with all they could eat for free.

Anyway at this time I was home for Tim's birthday and ended up hiking with Tom Leonard and Dandy Don, which was great.

The bad thing was they had what hikers call "exploding packs." What this means is that they would literally take over a shelter by messily putting their gear all over the shelter, turning it into absolute bedlam. I dealt with this by making sure anything I didn't need stayed in my pack. By necessity my food bag hung from the rafters among the various items of wet Spunks clothing.