



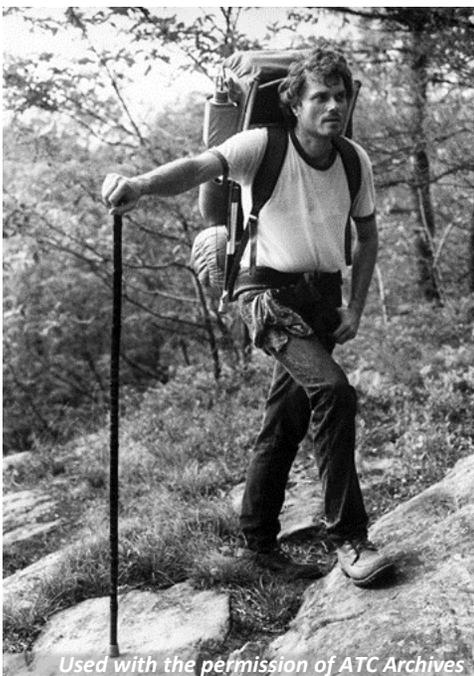
The Benton MacKaye Trail From Dream to Reality

As a youth, the founding father of the Benton MacKaye Trail, Dave Sherman declared, “If I ever get out of southwest Georgia, I’ll never go camping again.” During the hot and humid Georgia summers, his family would camp while clearing poison ivy and scrub oaks from the family’s timberland in Early County, GA. The heat, the humidity and the mosquitos did little to make camping an enticing endeavor for Sherman.

Although the work discouraged his enjoyment of some outdoor activities, the concept of the need to preserve the forest’s ecosystems was indelibly ingrained in the young man. Entrepreneurs of that time didn’t understand the diverse ecosystems of the area and the land had been clear cut. Too many of the long leaf species were lost – something that Sherman’s Great Uncle Walter would come to regret.

Sherman’s aversion to camping disappeared when he was sent to California’s Fort Ord for basic training. It was his first experience camping under the stars in cool weather. He thoroughly enjoyed the nights as cool breezes wafted in from the ocean.

In 1970, Sherman was returning home from a business meeting in Tennessee. He didn’t look forward to being stuck in Atlanta’s rush hour traffic, so he perused his highway atlas searching for something to do. It indicated Mount Oglethorpe was the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail (AT) -- he decided a visit would be a good way to pass the time. What he found disgusted him. The area was a garbage dump. Not one to stand silent, Sherman wrote a letter to Joe Tanner (then Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources) asking how the state could allow the southern terminus of the AT to become a garbage dump. Tanner replied that the terminus had not been there since 1958. It had been moved to Springer Mountain and now was managed by the Forest Service with the help of volunteers.



*Sherman in 1980 on East Mountain,
Massachusetts.*

Sherman’s initial attempts to visit the AT on Springer were unsuccessful and he realized he needed to learn more about hiking and the AT. When he finally did reach the summit, Sherman said, “I was in the woods – it felt like a magnet. I wondered what lies around the next curve and when I reached the summit, I wanted to know what’s next (on the trail)”. Sherman went on to complete a section hike of the AT. But, as he hiked the famous trail, some aspects of the trail still disappointed him. The trail suffered from overuse. “It was like an “army in retreat – so much trash and abandoned hike provisions on the trail,” said Sherman. “At shelters, there was trash everywhere.”

In the early 1970s, Sherman attended a presentation given by Billy Taylor on his thru hike of the AT. Sherman was captivated. When talking to Taylor afterwards, Sherman mentioned he planned on hiking the entire AT himself – he finished that hike in 1983.

Taylor’s reply stunned Sherman -- “Well, if you’re going to do it, you had better do it before it is too late.” Taylor explained development pressures along the AT were forcing the trail off private land onto public roads and there may not be a continuous trail much longer.

It was at the presentation that Sherman met George Owen and Margaret Drummond, two of the six founding members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA). It was Owen who introduced Sherman to hiking, backpacking and trail maintenance.

Sherman was curious about the history of the AT and how/why the location was changed from the original proposal. Drummond gave Sherman access to the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC) archives, a treasure trove that included letters from

Benton MacKaye, Myron Avery as well as a map of MacKaye’s initial proposal for the route of the AT.

In 1975, Sherman became State Coordinator for the Georgia Heritage Trust Program, the land acquisition arm of the Department of Natural Resources. Shortly thereafter he was appointed Chief of the Historic Preservation Section and State Historic Preservation Officer of Georgia.

Inspired by the GATC material, Sherman began to think about a new, wilderness trail utilizing one of MacKaye’s spur routes for the AT that had not been used. Sherman began to dream of a more primitive and remote trail that would attract hikers who already had hiked the AT and were looking for an uncrowded experience and environment. Of up most importance for the trail ... no

shelters. Because of his experiences at shelters, Sherman believed that shelters were a major cause for the overuse of the AT. The trail should be all about the natural environment that surrounds the footpath.

He proposed the concept of a new trail to several members of GATC ... an intriguing, but not readily accepted proposal. "I thought he was a little crazy," said BMTA founding member George Owen as Owen described his thoughts at the time.

In 1977, Sherman was promoted to be the Director of Office of Planning and Research where he administered 29 state and federal programs.

At the same time, planning began in earnest for a more primitive and remote trail that would attract hikers who already had hiked the AT and were looking for an uncrowded experience and environment. But this trail would have no shelters – Sherman was adamant!

Using USGS and relief maps, Sherman concluded that from the standpoint that most of the land already was owned by the government, MacKaye's high elevation route was especially attractive. But was it feasible?

Sherman hired Roy Arnold (a member of the Governor's Intern Program) to check the entire route on the ground. Were there impediments to stream/road crossings? What about steep inclines? How would the trail cross the Little Tennessee River? If impediments were found, Arnold was to propose modifications to avoid/eliminate them.

Sherman provided letters of introduction for all the land managers along the route. Arnold was to advise them about the proposed trail and get their feedback – hopefully he would receive approval from each of them.

When enlisting support for the trail, Arnold's analysis of the proposed route was a valuable report included with the BMT's original concept map.

When it came to getting the trail through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP), Sherman worked closely with Boyd Evison, then Superintendent of the GSMNP. Initially, Sherman proposed just a short segment connecting with the AT within the park.

According to Sherman, Evison's reaction was, "Why stop there? We need a lower elevation trail all the way to Davenport Gap."

The lower elevation trail, running parallel to AT, was needed so rangers could divert hikers away from the overused AT as well as to help avoid the growing number of winter rescues where snow trapped hikers in shelters for days. Some of the hikers tried bush-whacking to get out. Some fell, got lost or otherwise injured themselves – almost all resulted in dangerous winter rescues.

Evison's backcountry rangers provided a lower elevation route and Sherman gladly accepted their proposal. That 93-mile-route made the BMT the longest trail in the GSMNP!

Another question was what to name the trail. Benton MacKaye's name was front and center in the discussion. Other worthy contenders were: Myron Avery who is credited with getting the AT on ground and built. Arnold Guyot was one of the greatest explorers of the Appalachians during antebellum period.

"It was such a natural fit to name the trail for the man who designed it," said Sherman. "His map showed the trail coming down the spine of the Smokies and extending into the Cohuttas. But once it got through the Smokies and across the Little Tennessee River – then followed the height of land down the spine of the Blue Ridge range, where should it go south of the Cohuttas? The Cohuttas being more a range of elevations and not just a single, fixed summit, it seemed appropriate simply to route it over to Springer Mountain," Sherman concluded.

And then there were the practical questions. Who builds the trail and who will maintain it once it's built? The answer to both questions was the Benton MacKaye Trail Association which was founded in 1980. The six founding members were: Dave Sherman, recognized as the Founding Father of the Benton MacKaye Trail; George Owen; Margaret Drummond; Nancy Shofner; Lyman Emerson and Randy Snodgrass.

Another question was how to blaze the new trail. White diamond blazes would be the most distinctive – no other trail in the area used them. The white diamond blazes now guide hikers along most of the 288-mile route (no blazes are allowed in Wilderness Areas).

In 1978 Sherman moved to Washington, DC as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. Snodgrass, then the Southeast Regional Director for the Wilderness Society, took the lead for promoting the concept of a second long distance hiking trail.



MacKaye's 1921 proposed map for the AT.

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association was founded in 1980 and trail construction began in Georgia the same year. As construction progressed, Pat Thomas, Supervisor of the Cherokee National Forest, approved the BMT being routed through the Cohutta Wilderness.

When the trail crossed the border into Tennessee in 1987, BMTA celebrated the completion of 93 miles of trail.

BMTA member Clayton Pannell spearheaded the effort to extend the trail through the Cherokee and Nantahala national forests. Once approvals were granted, and with the GSMNP approval in hand, BMTA volunteers quickly completed the trail along its entire proposed route across three states!

The grand opening for the Benton MacKaye Trail was held in 2005. Today, approximately 95% of the route is on public lands managed by either the US Forest Service or the National Park Service. Only 15 miles currently remain on private land or as short road walks.



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Benton MacKaye in Shirley Center, Massachusetts.