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RB: Rodney Bragdon

ED: Erin Devlin

JM: Jeff Marion

MK: Mills Kelly

Transcript:

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SM [music] Many people tried to hike the entire 2000 mile Appalachian Trail, but few have finished. In fact, only about 1 in 4 makes it all the way. So why do people give up? Turns out one common reason has something to do with cold feet, literally.

AS I learned very quickly that I would have to—when I took off my boots at night—open the boots very loosely, because otherwise they get frozen. And when you go to get into your boots in the morning, you can't get your feet in. Unless you leave them open. And, you know, putting your feet in frozen boots in the morning, you know, it's challenging. Because they'll start to thaw them but you're chilled a lot of the time. I think that's why a lot of people get off the trail eventually is those discomforts.

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today we dig into one of America's most cherished national treasures, the Appalachian Trail. [music]. Later, we'll learn how national parks in the south used to be segregated. But first, the Appalachian Trail stretches from Georgia to Maine, 2181 miles of rugged terrain. Many shudder at the thought of hiking the entire trail. But a few people see it as

an opportunity, a challenge. Rodney Bragden, a psychology professor at Shenandoah University, is one of those people. Rodney, you thru hiked the entire Appalachian Trail, Georgia to Maine. Why in the world would you do that? What did you want to get out of that challenge?

RB I've always loved hiking and just being in the wilderness. We actually started talking about, you know, what are the benefits from a psychological perspective of being outside? A lot of research has started to show that this is great for you physically but also great for you mentally. And so I started talking about it with some colleagues and, to be honest with you, some folks started joking with me saying, "Hey, you should hike the Appalachian Trail and you can do some research along the way." And then later on, it just kinda started hitting me. Like, you know, maybe I can do that. And so was borne the trip. And I started looking into it and researching it and made it happen.

SM Did you ever get lonely or bored along the way?

RB No. Not really in the least bit. I actually left February 18th which is fairly early in the season for most thru hikers. Because I wanted to stay away from the big crowds that are starting these days. A lot more people are trying every year to complete the Appalachian Trail. So one of my reasons for starting early was to seek that isolation and to kind of stay away from what they call the bubble which is the big group of people that leave between March 1st and April 1st. When I got to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, which is about kind of a psychological halfway point. And I was number 72 in the registration book, meaning I was the 72nd person that had made it from Georgia to the halfway point by then. But on a typical day, I would probably only see three or four, you know, other folks.

SM Were you ever afraid of people along the trail? The prospect of an unsavory hiker?

RB No. I never was really fearful of people from a safety standpoint. The only thing that really scared me was the weather a couple of nights. Wind was actually, to me, the scariest part of the Appalachian Trail. The scariest night I had I think was in Virginia. And the wind had been blowing pretty strongly all day long. The wind just seemed like it was coming from every single direction, and the gusts were very very strong. It really is the day where branches were falling down, you know, off of the trees. And all day long, I was hiking thinking, where can I get to that might be protected? And I really couldn't find a side of the mountain or an area that was sheltered from these gusty winds. And you know, people, when they set up their tent, they often forget to look up to see what the dangers are above you as you're setting up your tent. You know, is there a dead tree above you. So I was really being conscious of that looking for this place to set my tent. And I finally just said, this is it. This is the best place. I looked for the healthiest trees, I picked the spot that I thought was going to be the calmest for the evening. And I sat inside that tent listening to this wind howl. And I actually heard a tree fall in the distance

from my tent. And I was just sorta so anxious and just sitting there worried about this. And I finally just said to myself, you know what, there's nothing I can do. There's nothing I can do to help decrease the risk of something that might happen tonight. So, once I had that thought, I kind of put in my earplugs, and finally got some sleep.

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SM Were there some times when your heart just soared with the vista you encountered?

RB Yes. I mean, you really do have just these wonderful moments all along the way. You know? How can you hike for 6 months and not have those? I would start each day hiking with my headlamp on, you know, cause the sun hadn't come up yet so I could make sure I was experiencing the sunrises and just saw some really epic epic sunrises. So the very first hostel that I came to was in Georgia. And it is kind of a well known hostel because it is one of the very first ones that you run into probably after, I don't know, 30 or 40 miles that you've done. And that evening, a large group of 20-something kids came in. I call them kids. I'm 25. They wanted to party and kind of hang out very late. They did the wrong thing and it was just too loud for me. And I remember I couldn't get any sleep because, you know, they were having a good time. And so I remember getting up. I left at 4 in the morning and I said, you know what, this is not for me. I'm going to get ahead of this crowd. And so I started hiking at 4 in the morning, and it was this very misty, cloudy morning. And my headlamp was very low on battery, so I actually had to hold my headlamp not on my head but I had to hold it down sort of on my knee level so I could see the tread on the trail. And it was this kind of spooky environment climbing up on this next mountain ridge. And a group of coyotes had started to howl. And make sort of all this noise. And I just remember stopping for probably just five minutes, and listening to the coyotes. And then this misty foggy morning was just a surreal experience that I just will always stick with me.

SM Part of you frightened, part of you in awe?

RB No, really no fear. Just, what a great experience to have, you know? Who else is going to be here at 4:30 in the morning experiencing this. [laughs].

SM How rough was it to encounter snow as you hiked?

RB Yeah, that was probably my biggest challenge for me. One of the advantages to me is my hiking experience when I started. So I was pretty dialed in with boots and backpacks and all of the gear that I needed. I was experienced with it, knew what I needed. But those early months—the cold is very challenging. You know, when you stop hiking, you get chilled very quickly. So to try to stay warm during that downtime is a challenge. And getting set up in the morning when you're taking your big nips off to try to break down your tent and get breakfast ready and pack all your items, your hands will get really cold

and your feet are cold and I learned very quickly that I would have to, when I took off my boots at night, open the boots very loosely, cause otherwise they get frozen and when you go to get into your boots in the morning, you can't get your feet in. Unless you leave them open. And, you know, putting your feet in frozen boots in the morning, you know, it's challenging. Cause they'll start to thaw them but you're chilled a lot of the time. I think that's why a lot of people get off the trail eventually is those discomforts.

SM Did you make a fire every night pretty much?

RB I actually did not make a single fire the whole Appalachian Trail.

SM Wait, how could you stay warm then?

RB Yeah, um, fires take time. My priorities were to set up camp as quickly as possible, get as much food as I could into me that night, and then I would basically be in bed and ready to do it again tomorrow.

SM I heard a lot of through hikers eventually get assigned a kind of nickname. Did you have one?

RB I did and you're right. Everybody sort of, it's kind of a rule almost, an unspoken rule. You have to have one. Mine became Bones, and the way that I got my trail name is that I happened to be sitting next to an individual that was listening to a conversation that I was having with my mother at the time. And my mother was just very concerned that I was going to be able to eat enough food, I'm already a pretty slender fellow, and she was just worried that I was going to come back skin and bones. And I got done talking to her and, you know, this person I was with says, how's your mother? And I said, oh, fine, she's just worrying like all mothers do. She thinks I'm going to come back skin and bones. Few days later I saw him actually in the smoky mountains and it was snowing and I was coming down this ridge and he was in the bottom drying some clothes out. And he just yelled up, Hey Bones, as I was coming. And then it sticks. Cause when you get labeled it just has a tendency to stay with you.

SM How hard was it to get enough calories in to justify your hiking?

RB Probably besides the cold, that is the second biggest challenge. And I was worried about losing too much weight. You know, I think after two weeks, your body starts to realize how many calories you need. So I remember going into actually a hotel just to get cleaned up for the night and do some laundry and all that kind of stuff that we have to do every now and then. And of course they had one of those free continental breakfasts deals in the morning, and I remember just kind of going up and getting some muffins and making a bagel or whatever and I ate that. And then I went up again and I got a few other items, cereal or, you know, whatever they had. I just remember going back literally four or five times for more food and it was just kind of something that sat in the back of my mind like how can I still be hungry?

SM A lot of hikers feel transformed by the long journey. Did you experience that also?

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RB The one thing that I noticed to change me was it really reinstalled my faith in humankind. In today's society, we get so disconnected with technology and we're all so busy, and these conversations are hard to start. And often times, we just don't talk to each other. And that was so different on the Appalachian Trail. Maybe it was just that I had the pack and people love to talk to you and ask you what you're doing and what your experience has been. And people were just so overly warm and welcoming to me, I mean, it was very common for people to buy me dinner, buy me a beer, invite me actually to their homes to have a meal or to get cleaned up and to have a shower. It was just really eye-opening just to connect with so many humans just on that basic level without cellphones, without other distractions.

SM What about integrating back into the hustle and bustle of your former lifestyle? Was that hard?

RB You know, to be honest with you, reintegrating back into society was way more challenging than getting used to being a hiker everyday. Things seemed so fast to me. I was really aware of sort of our materialistic society as I came back. And these things, they really, my eyes were really open to these kinds of things, because I was used to living, you know, everything I needed, was in my backpack for 6 months. And they actually call it the hiker blues. A lot of people go into, they really do, some pretty significant depression when they have to come off the trail and get back into the hustle and bustle of our society.

SM Did you?

RB I did, I mean I wouldn't say I had a big bout of depression, but it was definitely noticeable and it took a while to readjust and kind of get back because it was just such an amazing experience that you don't want to let go of it. You know? And again, I really felt, for me, it was that disconnection among folks. I became really sensitive to people on cellphones, for people, I work as a professor in my life, to see students who aren't engaging with each other, who are choosing to look at cell phones, be in computers in the hustle and bustle, where we walk past people everyday, and we don't really engage them in any meaningful conversation. To me, that was really the part that kind of hurt my heart in a way. And that I really craved that, you know, personal connection that you had. When you were just hiking along talking to folks that you ran into.

SM That's so interesting, cause on one hand, you hardly wanted to see anyone. You were avoiding crowds, you got up early and made your way solo along, and yet you valued the conversations and encounters you did have.

RB Exactly, you know, I think it was just the right amount of human contact for me if that makes sense. It worked out perfectly for me. Cause yeah, of course, you have to get into town and do all those things, so yeah it was just amazing. Living in the moment I think is something that you really get used to everyday, because you don't have a to-do list. There aren't daily hassles and the bills that you have to take care of. And you have everything that you need, so you really get kind of fine tuned into living for the moment, and not really worrying about what happened in the past, and not really all that much about what you have to do in the future. And then I think when you finish this trip, there's this kind of celebration, and then it really is over. And you have to go back and you have to go back into your career, or begin a career if you were just taking some time in between. And the daily hassles of life start popping up again. And for me, that was the huge challenge. Because, how wonderful it is and how many people get the opportunity to take 6 months and go on this epic journey like this? Not many people. [music].

SM Rodney Bragdon is a psychology professor at Shenandoah University. Coming up next, the history of segregation at national parks in the south. When we think about our national parks, most of us conjure images of natural splendor preserved for everyone to enjoy. But this wasn't always the case. Erin Devlin of the University of Mary Washington says, before World War II, national parks in the south were segregated, reflecting the laws and customs of the Jim Crow south.

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ED Yeah, well I think one of the most useful sets of sources for me was Letters of Complaint that were written by African American travelers who were encountering this segregated landscape in the national parks and trying to make sense of what they were experiencing, because many travelers came to the national parks in the southern states, and they assumed that they would be integrated. They were federal parks. They may have visited another park in the west and not encountered any kind of racial distinction or discrimination being made. And so when they came to a park in the south and did encounter a For White Only sign, or a park ranger instructed them to move to another park or the picnic ground, they had questions about that. So an example is a letter of complaint from the mid 1930s in Shenandoah national park from an African American man who was traveling through the park with his family and some friends. And they stopped at a picnic table to have lunch. And, for many African American travelers, their ability to have access to a picnic ground was particularly important, because they were denied the ability to stop at other restaurants or roadside stops along the way and so many African American travelers frequently packed food in their trunks to eat along the roadside. And so this particular gentleman had stopped with his family and friends at this picnic area and, as they were sitting down and getting ready to eat, a young white CCC worker, who was a civilian conservation core worker, helping to actually construct the park and lay the roads, approached their party and told them to move to a different part of the park that had been set aside for the use of African American visitors. And after this encounter, this gentleman wrote to the national park service. Basically inquiring, you know, what is going on? Is this the established policy of the national parks? And he must have been disappointed to receive a letter back from

the park service essentially saying yes it is our intention to provide segregated facilities in the southern states to abide by local law and established custom and to provide facilities for the use of white visitors and facilities for the use of black visitors.

SM So did the park service, when it was thinking about building facilities in the south, just decide, “hey the south is segregated, let’s go ahead and build separate facilities in every state there”? Or did they have to work it out?

ED So, initially, as the parks are being built in the southeastern states, the park service is in constant communication with local state officials, because the park service doesn’t go out and buy land to establish national parks. Rather, what frequently happens is states coordinate that effort and then they donate land to the national park service. So, there’s a give and take as that process is unfolding, as state and federal officials negotiate what they think their vision for the park will be. And, in the case of Virginia, Harry Byrd was the governor at the time, in the late 1920s when Shenandoah national park was being established. And he’ll later go on to become a very powerful southern senator and, really the architect of the strategy of massive resistance to Brown vs. Board of Education, right, and trying to roll back any effort to integrate southern schools, or other kinds of southern facilities in the 1950s and 1960s. So, in this early stage in his career, in the 1920s, as he’s engaged in conversations with national park service officials about what the boundaries of Shenandoah national park are going to be, and the role of the park and the state et cetera, he reaches what’s called a gentlemen’s agreement with park service officials that they will abide by established law and customs in the state of Virginia in relation to racial segregation.

SM So, that was Harry Byrd for Virginia. Did this take place with governor after governor throughout the south—this negotiation with the federal department of the interior as to how to segregate their facilities?

ED You know, ultimately, the national park service and the department of the interior, began to discuss internally how they were planning to move forward as they were establishing parks in the southern states. And they do decide, at kind of a policy level, that those parks that are established in states where segregation is common practice, in schools and in restaurants and in restroom facilities, that they too will segregate visitor facilities in those states. In parts of the country where segregation is not common practice, then they decide that they’re going to have integrated visitor facilities.

SM When did we start to actually integrate the parks that had been segregated in the south?

ED That unfolds slowly over the late 1930s moving into World War II. So, as secretary of the interior, he’s, as well as the national park service, are receiving recurrent letters of complaint from African American visitors as well as from white visitors as well who are expressing their dismay that the federal government is separating the races in this way. He basically orders an internal review of this policy. And essentially, the decision that he ultimately comes to in the late

1930s is that he wants to experiment with integration at a single picnic ground to see what happens. Do white visitors object? Does violence erupt? Do people stop visiting the parks? What is the outcome? A lot of arguments made against integrating facilities were arguments grounded in fear. If we do this, then x will happen. And Equis basically said let's test it on the ground, let's try it in one single picnic area. So they do that.

SM Where?

ED It's Pinnacle's picnic ground in Shenandoah national park within an hour of Washington D.C. So, in some ways, Equis is experimenting in his own backyard. This is a park that, it's easy for officials in Washington D.C. to travel to and figure out what's going on on the ground. And that's particularly important because the local parks superintendent did not support the notion of experimenting with integration in the parks. When the park service tried to minimize racial signs, like make the white only and negro only signs smaller, he wrote back to the Washington office saying, "I think what we need is more and bigger—more white only signs, large enough to serve their pupose." So there's this real kind of conflict about what to do in all of the southern national parks that is unfolding through this experiment at a single picnic area.

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SM So help me understand what segregated facilities look like in a single picnic area. There are signs and picnic tables and they're separated by what?

ED Well so it really varies from park to park. In a park like Shenandoah, there were white only picnic areas, and then there was Louis Mountain, the African American only picnic area. In many cases, what the park is trying to do is to maximize racial segregation. So they might situate one of these picnic areas for African American visitors in a wooded, screened off place. They might locate an African American rest area at the bottom or the top of a steep hill so it would be separated. And so these kinds of conversations are unfolding in correspondence between local park planners and the regional office and the federal office and it's through that kind of documentation that we can begin to understand how these landscapes were constructed.

SM So, when African Americans were traveling through the parks or to the parks to visit, how did they know which areas they were allowed to be in when it came to the southern national parks?

ED So, in many cases, there are directional signs. You also would receive a map when you visited the map. African Americans also relied on published travel guides to help them navigate through unfamiliar locations and spaces in the southern states. Most famously, the Green Book, but there were a number of other publications that served the same kind of purpose. And, essentially, they were directories that would provide people with information about hotels that accepted African American travelers, restaurants that were owned by local members of the

black community, other places that would provide friendly service—Louis Mountain, for example, and Shenandoah—was listed as a site in the Green Book where people could travel and receive friendly accommodation. None of the other sites in Shenandoah are listed in that volume. Even after the park service formally desegregates after World War II. So if we look at copies of the Green Book from the 1950s all the way up to its final publication, Louis Mountain is still the only site that's listed in that travel guide. On the flip side, if we look at publications produced by the state of Virginia for white travelers, they list all of the campsites except for Louis Mountain all the way up to the 1950s and 1960s. So, even after the formal policy changes on the ground, it's important to understand that visitors are still being steered to these different sites, and established patterns of visitation really do persist for decades.

SM You know, digging through the park archives, you've uncovered some really special records from African American school children. These were girl scouts and boy scouts?

ED Yeah, so the park service also established facilities for organized camping, and these are places where boy scouts and girl scouts and YMCA groups and others could send troops and young groups of campers to stay in the parks for extended periods of time—a week or even four weeks or longer periods during the summer months. As part of their programs, many of these young people produce their own newspaper or newsletters as part of the activities that they were engaged in. And these documents really provide us with insight into how these young campers that were 8, 9, 10, and 11 felt about their camping experience. Many of these newsletters include handwritten cartoons—I always like to share with my students sometimes this young woman who, she drew different kinds of faces in response to the different kinds of activities that she did, like how she felt when she woke up in the morning, how she felt when she went swimming, and they really resonate with students today because they look like emojis. [laughs]. But it was sort of her 1950s version of emojis and her camping experience, so they're just really beautiful to read and for these school children, these campers, this was really the only opportunity they had to engage in this outdoor recreation. State governments often did not provide African American camping organizations with access to camp grounds. And certainly that's the case here in the state of Virginia, but it's true in other parts of the south. I came across one report of a camp pageant or theatrical in the 1940s where the campers rewrote the words to God Bless American and they rewrote it to say God Bless Interior, and they recounted all these different aspects of new deal legislation that they felt had benefited their communities, ranging from the Agricultural Adjustment Act to that civilian conservation core, but they concluded of now less importance, camps for you and me. And just really embraced this opportunity to be in this outdoor space when that had been an experience that had been denied to African American school children.

SM Do you actually have the words to that song?

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ED Yeah, I mean they go onto say, “And the one department, which we have to thank, or our land established, model parks and camps.” As I read through these documents, there’s something really poignant about it, because I’ve just spent the proceeding half hour or hour reading correspondence between park planners about how to maximize segregation in this very space that they’re enjoying. How to ensure that there’s no chance that a white or a black camper might actually run into each other in the woods, or responding to letters of complaint or concern from surrounding residents about the rival of African American campers near their community. And so that’s part of what I’m trying to get at in this project I think is trying to understand how this landscape of segregation was created, the impact that it had on the way that we continue to experience parks today, but also the way that African American visitors really claimed some of these spaces for their own, and used them to nurture and raise their children, used them to nurture their family relationships, and came to national parks as the routine part of Sunday school picnics and homecoming celebrations and all of those kinds of things. [music]

SM Erin Devlin is a history and American studies professor at the University of Mary Washington. Welcome back to With Good Reason and Virginia Humanities. The Appalachian Trail has never been more popular, due in part to recent Hollywood Films like A Walk in the Woods starring Robert Redford and Nick Nolty. The movie follows two middle aged friends as they hike the entire trail.

AS I don’t want to reach for metaphors, but...

No, reach, Bryson, reach.

Well, they say the Appalachian Trail’s like life. You don’t know what’s ahead, you don’t know what’s going to happen next, but you give it your best shot. So, on that note, we go?

We go.

SM But the trail’s newfound popularity isn’t without its downside. Jeff Marion at Virginia Tech has been studying visitor impact on the Appalachian Trail for years. And he says a sharp increase in foot traffic is causing some problems. Jeff, you’ve loved hiking all your life. What have you been doing recently that has been most thrilling to you?

JM Um, well, years ago, about 6 years ago, I finished doing a section hike of the entire Appalachian Trail, which culminated 43 years of my life starting way back in middle school. And now I’ve started on the Pacific Crest trail, and I’d have to name that as the most thrilling part of my outdoor activities today is I’m doing section hikes, usually about 100 miles a year, week on the trail, which runs from Canada, all the way to the Mexico border.

SM Surely, you, in these experiences, don't encounter overuse of parks, that these are such pristine wilderness areas that, even though a lot of people are using them, you're not encountering abuse or sloppy hiking practices.

JM Well, yes and no. I mean, I'm often attracted to the same, highly scenic places that other people are, and so I'm out there in some of the, we call them destination areas, where they've got just incredibly gorgeous scenery. And, you know, you and a million other people wanna go visit that same place. And we occasionally come across places where the trail is badly eroded or it's really muddy or we come across a pristine lake that just has several dozen campsites around it, some of which are enormous and, you know, all the vegetation is gone and it's bare soil and there's fire scars and there's damage to trees and things like that. And you go down to the lake to filter water and someone threw their spaghetti noodles into the water cause they washed their dishes right there, and so you see that. I see a lot more of it professionally, because I'm a scientist with the federal government who studies visitors impacts. That's when I really see the outrageous kinds of impacts that make me want to almost cringe.

00:30:54

SM You wrote a whole book about this called Leave No Trace in the Outdoors. And it outlines 7 leave no trace principles. Briefly, what are those 7?

JM Sure, I can run through those. And the first one is plan ahead and prepare. The second is travel and camp on durable surfaces. The third is dispose of waste properly. Four is leave what you find. Five is minimize campfire impacts. Six is respect wildlife. And the last, seventh, is be considerate of other visitors.

SM So what sort of is the most common easiest one for us to think about that we should really have at the top of our list. Is it what we cook? Is it the campfires that we make? Is it where we relieve ourselves?

JM I would almost point to the first one, to plan ahead and prepare. In other words, before you venture into the outdoors, read up on, you know, what are these impacts and why is it that we're loving these protected areas to death in some cases? I mean, we all love to visit these amazing protected natural areas, these parks, these forests, these wildlife refuges, these wilderness areas, I mean it's an incredible legacy that the American public has at its disposal. And we'd like to have our kids, our grandkids, all able to use these pristine areas in future years and with future generations of us. They're not going to be there unless we take care of them. Part of it is personal responsibility, part of it is just you and I going out and hiking and camping and fishing and hunting and whatever recreational activity you're engaged in. How is my particular use potentially going to impact these places, or the experiences of other visitors that I see out in these places? What could I do personally differently...what could I bring with me, like a cathole travel, so that I could bury my human waste. What could I do personally that would leave this place in as good of a condition as I found it?

SM You have completed a big study of the Appalachian Trail looking at what kind of impact the visitors there are having. Is there much wearing down of the trail?

JM Yeah, they estimate somewhere around 3 million visitors per year, every year many thousands of through hikers start north and they start down in Georgia in the spring and head north. And the number of these through hikers has dramatically increased over the last several, well really the last 10 years or so. And as it moves north it does disperse. But initially, down in the deep south, you can have places like a gap where everyone camps next to a spring or something, and we were finding in some cases as many as 100 people all camping in that gap in a single night. Just a very large number of people traveling north in this bubble of use is quite frankly creating some really serious problems for the trail community to deal with.

SM Any ideas on what might lesson that?

JM Yeah, so our research identified a number of things that managers can do. And one of them is to shift that camping out of large flat places, often time streams for example have flat embankments and stream sides, and people all camp in those kinds of places. And when you have large numbers of people camping in a big flat place, you can have campsite expansion going on very easily, and you can have people creating new campsites next to the old ones very easily, and so these aerial measures of trampling and bear ground and soil going straight into the creek and things is very problematic in these flat places. And the research pointed very strongly to the benefits of shifting that use into more sloping terrain. There are slopes around the campsites that prevent the campsites from getting larger and prevent people from creating new campsites nearby, and there has been a very substantial effort to start to shift this sort of camping out of big flat places near water that are very popular to sloping terrain.

SM How do you shift it?

JM So you can go to these sloping areas, and either find campsites that are already there, and make them a little more level for tenting, or you can go into really sloping terrain and literally just create flat bench campsites and we call them side hill campsites but you essentially do a little cut and fill work with a shovel just like you would build a trail. And you make a flat spot in sloping terrain that's big enough to support a tent and you make a whole bunch of them. And in fact that AT community has already created about 600 of these sidehill campsites since, oh, around 2001 or 2.

00:35:46

SM It actually sounds damaging to the terrain, to me, somehow.

JM Well, it can, I mean, you're out there doing some digging to cut and fill, but you're creating a very small campsite that will be intensively used and it won't expand and so you

create a campsite that's like 500 square feet. And if you come back in 10 years, because of the sloping terrain, it's still 500 feet, whereas in these large flat places, people had been creating campsites for years and the sites, there might be 2 or 3 sites closeby, and you come back in 5 years, and they've merged together because of site expansion, and you now have 1 campsite that has 2,000 square feet of bare soil, and people are camping all over it, right next to each other. And so you've got crowding and conflicts and noise from one group to another and people complain about the social conditions—in the wilderness, literally, you have people saying, “they were over there chopping wood and building up a big bonfire at midnight last night and I need to get up and hike 25 miles tomorrow.” And it's just the conflicts that—you don't go to nature to experience conflicts, you know? Someone's calling someone on their cell phone at 6 in the morning and you're still trying to sleep, or they're chasing a bear out of the campsite in the middle of the night because someone didn't put their food up, and—

SM I was amazed to learn that you had a giant bug collection when you were a boy, and but amazed to learn that nowadays you would even recommend against removing bugs. That surprises me.

JM Yeah, I was a regular naturalist as a youth. I read—there was a series of books called Fox Fire Books and I read many of them, and one of the things I decided to do.. I think I took earth science, and we had to make a small bug collection for earth science. And I had a kill jar filled with a chemical that immediately killed the bugs and then you had to take them home and spread them out with pins on a piece of styrofoam and then you mounted them in a box. And so I developed a fairly large collection. But years and years later I looked at that collection and I saw things like luna moths, which are just gorgeous big moths—they're green in color. And I had a rhinoceros beetle which is today a very rare beetle. It's very large, it's like 2 inches long and it has a wingspan of about 4 inches. And so I looked at some of those insects which were in my collection from then, which today are much more rare insects. And I sort of cringe and say, you know, I shouldn't really have taken...I mean, common insects, no big deal, but these somewhat more rare and somewhat more special insects, I sort of feel a regret that I collected them.

SM Do you have any fun trips planned soon for your personal hiking pleasure?

JM I do. I just had a meeting with my adventure crew, these are high school students. We're going to canoe quite a few of the streams down in Florida. I'm really excited to do that. There's a bunch of different rivers that are crystal clear water. And you canoe through them and you can see the alligators down on the bottom. And turtles and things. And fish. Crystal clear creeks. So that's one and then this summer I'm taking the same adventure crew to Utah to do canyoneering. And so we'll be in Zion national park and then we'll go over to escalante and do a lot of slot canyons. These are very narrow, windy canyons that can have cliffs that go up hundreds of feet or in some cases thousands of feet and just towering over your head. Can be dangerous, you know, watch the weather very carefully, because you don't want to be in a slot canyon when there's a rainstorm. But it's also just an incredible scenery. Just amazing scenery. [music].

SM Jeff Marion is a professor in the College of Natural Resources and Environment at Virginia Tech. Coming up next...from socialism to hiker fashion trends. The many histories of the Appalachian Trail. Hiking is all about self-sufficiency. Being free and exploring the wilderness. And it doesn't get much more American than that. But few people know the Appalachian Trail was first conceived as a socialist project. Mills Kelly is a history professor at George Mason University. He traces that trail's often overlooked history. Mills, tell me about your own experience hiking the Appalachian Trail. What portion of it would you hike when you were younger?

00:40:32

MK I started hiking on the Appalachian Trail as a young teenager back in the 1970s. Our boy scout troop was a hiking troop. Mostly we hiked in Shenandoah National Park and the trail to hike in Shenandoah National Park was the Appalachian Trail. I had no idea as a young teen that the Appalachian Trail went from Georgia to Maine. And it wasn't until I was, I don't know, 15 or so, that I came to understand that it was a 2,000 mile trail that I had been hiking on.

SM Did you ever yearn to do the whole thing?

MK Constantly. Here's what happened. In 1970, a man named Ed Garvey who lived in my neighborhood, through hiked the trail and then wrote a book about it called Appalachian Hiker, adventure of a lifetime. And he came to my boy scout troop and gave a presentation about his hike. And I was captivated by the idea that you could hike from Georgia to Maine all in 1 year. So I really wanted to do it and I had this plan that as soon as I graduated from college, that that was what I was going to do. And of course I needed a job and so instead of hiking the Appalachian Trail, I worked.

SM How far back do some of those trails that eventually became the 2,000 miles go? Surely portions were created by Native Americans?

MK Oh, for sure. Some of the oldest trails in the eastern United States were all laid down by the Cherokee or by the Mohawk or Elgonkeean people. So during the colonial era then as settlers began to build trading networks, they of course used the trails that the Native population had already laid down. And some of those became our road system and others then became trails in the mountain. So then in the late 19th century, as hiking clubs began to form, and then create trails for recreational purposes, they naturally used the trails that were already there, some of which were probably 3, 400 years old.

SM Tell me about the man who first proposed linking all of these mountain trails into one continuous pathway. Were they not continuous to begin with, really?

MK No, they weren't remotely continuous. Benton Machai was a very interesting man. He was a prominent American socialist, a regional planner, and done a lot of work for the U.S. forest service, and he was very concerned about the health of the working class population of the east coast, the workers in the big cities along the Atlantic seaboard. And this diagnosis for them was that they needed to spend more time in nature. And that a really good way for that to happen would be for them to get up in the mountains and hike on the trail or help to build a trail or build a network of trails. And so in 1921 when he was convalescing after the suicide of his wife, he proposed this Appalachian Trail in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects of all places. And the idea caught on right away, and by 1925, there was an organization dedicated to making his vision into a reality. But the socialist piece of that I think is important to remember because people often ask me, "why is the trail so close to all the big cities?" And the reason is because he wanted workers in 1921 to be able to get to the mountains and get to this trail that he proposed. And to do that, they had to ride a train or a bus. So it needed to be close.

SM Who nowadays mostly hikes along the Appalachian Trail? I assume, very few are actually people who go the whole length.

MK Almost nobody hikes the whole length in any given year. But it's the true hikers who get all the publicity because it's an achievement, it's an accomplishment, it's a big thing. The park service estimates that somewhere between 2 and 3 million people set foot on the Appalachian trail every year. Most of those hikers pull their car over on the side of the road, get onto the trail, hike to the top of the ridge, look back to their car, and go home. So that's the most common use of the trail. And honestly I think that would've made Benton Machai happy. Because these little short hikes on the Appalachian Trail that people take—it's pretty much what he had in mind. When we think about the long distance hikers, probably the two biggest groups are younger people out for adventure in nature, or older people. Lots of retirees or people who finally, you know, their children have gone out to college. They have more time. But what they share is this desire to do something hard. Something a little audacious. Something that some of their friends think is probably a little crazy.

SM Are they evenly mixed between men and women, would you say?

MK I would say, no. But that's changing really rapidly. Over the last 10 years, I've seen a real change in the male-female demographics of the hikers who I meet. So if it's not 50-50 male-female these days, it's getting close. But in the earliest days of the trail, it was a predominantly but not exclusively male place. The role of women as hikers and as trail builders is really underappreciated. They were actually very very involved right from the very beginning of the building of the trail and hiking on the trail. If anyone knows the name of any hiker on the Appalachian Trail, they know the name of Emily Gatewood, who everyone calls Grandma Gatewood. She was famous because she was this grandmother from a farm in Ohio, who decided to hike the whole trail and did in her 60s. You know, Sports Illustrated wrote a story about her, and she was on the Today show, and she was kind of a kook. And people found that endearing.

SM When you assigned your students to create reports on the history of the trail, anything that interested them, one of them wrote that it's one of the whitest places in America. That startles me.

00:46:22

MK It's the case that the national parks in the United States have been very white places since their founding. I would say that the national park service has made tremendous efforts over the past 15 to 20 years to change that and is making some real progress. But outdoor recreation, in the south was almost impossible for people of color to spend time camping and hiking in the forest because of segregation and racial violence. And one of my students asked in class once why was it that it took until the 1990s for an African American to through hike the Appalachian Trail all by himself. And one of my students of color said, "Hello, if you were Black and male, would you hike through the mountains of the American south all by yourself?"

00:47:09

SM Another of your students explored the fashion history of the trail. Tell me a little bit about how fashion trends evolved over the decades.

MK Yeah. That project is a perfect example of what happens when you turn students loose to pursue their own lines of inquiry as opposed to telling them what to do. She's someone who had been making her own clothes since she was a teenager, and she had attempted a through hike of the trail herself but had to bail out after an injury. And because she loved clothing and the making of clothing, she was really fascinated by change over time when it came to hiking clothes. And so that's what she did her project on. And one of the things that I learned from her work was that, in the 1930s and the 1940s, hikers wore these just outrageous boots that I lust for. They came all the way up to the knee, you must have had to lace them like 30 times to get them on, and they were solid leather made by L.L. Bean. They were just things of beauty. And I don't think you can buy them anymore. Or at least they're not something that would hold up to long distance hiking, but they were something else.

SM Why do you think tall leather boots instead of short ones?

MK I think there were two reasons. One, they were similar to the boots that soldiers wore. If you look at pictures of soldiers in the first World War, they wore boots that came up to their knees, but also people were really worried about snake bites. And those boots were supposed to protect you from rattlesnakes and copperheads.

SM People who make the longfold journey, apparently these through hikers are often given nicknames or often give themselves nicknames. What is that?

MK It's a trail name. People have trail names. We have a general idea that it began in the 1980s because you can begin to see in the shelter logs, I think every shelter along the Appalachian Trail where people write things about themselves or about the weather or about how hungry they are or whatever. And sometime in the 1980s, people started signing with trail names rather than their own names. You don't get to choose your trail name. It has to be chosen for you by someone else. One of the things that's great about the trail name phenomenon is that it confers a level of anonymity on the hikers. And I think this is especially important for women who don't want to reveal too much personal information about themselves for people that they might be hiking with, for a week or two or three. Or that they meet casually along the trail. And so I think it also lets people create personas for themselves for a period of time that they're in the mountains and I think that's not a bad thing.

SM So your students have done a number of these histories that are part of the digital project online. You have yourself looked into a portion of the Appalachian Trail that was moved decades ago.

MK Yeah, it's a really interesting story, because we had this sense that the Appalachian Trail is a fixed thing that the trail that you would go out and hike on today is the version of the trail that's been there since 1937 and it's not even remotely true. The trail has moved dramatically over the decades. And in 1952, 300 miles of the trail in southwestern Virginia were abandoned, and the trail was moved more than 50 miles west to its current location. And what's fascinating to me about this part of the story of the trail is that the trail left [inaudible] county, Patrick county, places like that in southwestern Virginia, it left there in 1952, and people who live there still remember it more than 70 years ago. It's still part of the way that they imagine their community and the place where they live. And to me that just shows you the power that the idea of the Appalachian Trail exerts in that cultural imaginings of Americans.

SM Mills Kelly is a history professor at George Mason University. To access his digital project, go to appalachiantrailhistory.org. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods and by the University of Virginia Health System, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Allison Byrne, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Millner. Some of the music is by Blue Dot Sessions. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening. [music]