President’s Report  

by Bill Neilan

As I begin my term leading the RATC, I want to extend a big THANK YOU to Jim Beeson for all he has done for the club over the last three years. His many accomplishments will be with the club for years to come. Jim’s term as president has ended but he will continue in the position of Vice President; as such, his work for the club will continue on such projects as the Cabin on the Dowd property. Additionally, Jim has some great ideas for creating revenue for the club (e.g. selling t-shirts on-line and in local retail stores) which will help the RATC continue to care for and maintain our 120 miles of AT. Jim is currently bicycling across the country with two friends he met while completing his AT thru-hike. I will be reaching out to Jim often during my term knowing he will be there to help me along.

- Jim Webb is recognized by the Partners Committee as Volunteer of the Year
- Brian Wilson is recognized as Partner of the Year. These folks are great examples of the dedicated people we have the privilege to work with.

The RATC leadership has some new members. Leading our recreational hikes now is our new Hike Master, Jennifer Frye. Jennifer is working to get our hiking program active again around the Covid restrictions. Taking over as the McAfee Knob Liaison is Dee Case. Dee will be working closely with Kathryn Herndon-Powell of the ATC and they have a training day scheduled for April 24, 2021. Rounding out our new leadership team is Kevin Moore. Kevin is the new Land Management Supervisor. He has already been in the field with the ATC crew finding and repainting boundary monuments and witness trees.

I encourage everyone to use the Meetup app to find RATC activities to participate in. There are work hikes, recreational hikes, Task Force training, first aid classes, etc. The list is always growing and I’m sure there is something for everyone.

Finally, let me introduce myself to the members I’ve not yet met. My wife and I moved to Roanoke in June of 2016 after retiring. I joined the RATC that October and began maintenance hikes right away. Soon after, I joined the McAfee Knob Task Force and became a volunteer Ridge Runner. I was the Land Management Supervisor before Kevin Moore took over and became Vice President when Diana Christopulos stepped down to lead the Land Conservancy.

I look forward to our being able to hold in-person corn boils and holiday parties again so I can have a chance to meet all of you. I’m proud to be the President of the RATC and I hope to make you as proud of being a member as well.

Thank you!
It is always a pleasure reporting the good works done by RATC members. It is even more pleasurable when those efforts are recognized by someone outside the club. Recently Therese and Homer Witcher were recognized for their exceptional work. I’ll let the words of Kurt Speers, Chief Ranger of the Forest Service, tell the story:

“After spending an hour surveying the trash dump, it was apparent that this would require a massive effort to clean up. The trash was strewn over the area, the size of a football field, which was choked with thorns and brambles. We considered various options to get the site cleaned up, a club clean-up day, a boy scout troop project, etc. Within two days of hearing about the garbage, three generations of Witchers had gone out and cleaned up the garbage. On Monday, January 25, we received notification that you had organized a family clean-up event on January 24. The cleanup party, which consisted of you, your daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren, removed over 300 pounds of garbage from the site. This effort required the use of fifty-two garbage bags. It is often said that the volunteers are the ‘heart and soul’ of the Trail. The preservation and protection of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is dependent upon volunteers like you and we thank you for your passion and commitment.”

Sincerely,
WENDY JANSSEN
Superintendent

Brian Wilson Nomination

by Bill Neilan

Since Ranger Brian Wilson began his role in 2018 he has immersed himself in AT activities. Brian continued to monitor the AT all through the time it was closed due to Covid-19 and managed to keep the trail safe for those that ventured out. He is a participant in McAfee Knob Task Force and his presence on the AT has greatly diminished camping and parking issues on the AT approaching McAfee Knob. He is easy to speak to and conducts himself in a professional manner. Ranger Wilson is the kind of person that makes hikers happy they met him; they come away from the meeting with a new appreciation of who rangers are and what they do.

Jim Webb Nomination

by Bill Neilan

In the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (RATC) Jim Webb is known as a “yes” man. Normally this would have a bad connotation but in Jim’s case it is the definition of a person that every club yearns for. When there is a blow-down reported Jim is the first to say “yes” to removing it. When there is a trail maintenance scheduled, Jim’s name is the first to appear as a “yes” to attend. When RATC needs someone to attend a meeting and no one else volunteers, Jim says “yes”. The list goes on and on but I think you get the message. Jim is the quintessential “do whatever it takes” person.

Jim Webb moved to Roanoke, VA in 2012 from Buffalo, NY and immediately began volunteering with RATC and the Midweek Crew, performing trail maintenance. He became RATC Trail Supervisor in 2015 and has consistently volunteered 1500 hours+ each year to AT trail maintenance. He has taken advantage of every training opportunity, i.e., Certified Sawyer, Wilderness Skills, Konnarock and Wilderness First Aid.

When Konnarock spent five weeks creating a relocation of the AT at Sinking Creek Jim Webb spent all five weeks working side by side with the ATC crew. When the five weeks were done and it turned out that an additional week of work was required to complete the relocation, Jim was on the list as a “yes” to spend a week in December to get the job done.

Jim Webb has many skills that he uses to care for and maintain our 120 miles of AT but his most valuable skill is his willingness to teach those skills to the rest of us. As a “B” sawyer Jim is always there to teach the “A” sawyers on how to improve their techniques. When the trail maintenance crew needs a solution on how to repair an eroded section of trail it is Jim that we turn to for advice.

The purpose of the Volunteer of the Year award is to recognize a person that volunteers their time at a level above and beyond. I cannot think of a person more deserving of this title than Jim Webb.
My 2020 started in December 2019 when a close friend died in a hit and run accident. I flew from my home in Blacksburg, VA - home to Virginia Tech where we met in college - to be with him in Galveston, TX. He was on life support for a few days before he generously donated his organs per his wishes. He was a physician and a teacher.

Several years back on a May morning I decided to walk the section from the Audie Murphy parking area to Trout Creek. I stopped for lunch under a cloudless azure sky with a view of Miller’s Cove. I had a 35 millimeter SLR camera with a long lens sitting beside me. As I was eating my lunch, I heard a sound above me. I looked up into an old dead snag above the trees and saw a spectacular sight. On three separate branches perched as pretty as you please were three birds. All three were neotropical migrants just arrived to begin their courtship behavior.

A special moment

by Butch Kelly

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“ It is a memory I’ll treasure forever...”

March 21, 2021

Two hikes and a wedding

by Ron Bradbury

After moving to Roanoke in 2013, I had heard over and over about “McAfee,” “Tinker Cliffs,” “Dragon’s Tooth,” and of the proximity of the AT, but had not overcome life’s inertia to navigate the logistics and find my way to the trail. In November of 2019, RATC member Diana Christopolus graciously guided me to McAfee Knob—my most recent previous hike on the AT was in 1978, so it had been a while. Little did I anticipate the eventual impact which Diana’s kind gesture would have on my life.

For my birthday this year I hiked to the top of a mountain—Bald Knob—with friends and had them paint my head with flowers. I wore my newest Life is Good t-shirt and smiled. Looking at this photo makes me feel positive every time I see it.

Life is good.

Stress at my hair date

by Lisa Garcia

My 2020 started in December 2019 when a close friend died in a hit and run accident. I flew from my home in Blacksburg, VA - home to Virginia Tech where we met in college - to be with him in Galveston, TX. He was on life support for a few days before he generously donated his organs per his wishes. He was a physician and a teacher.

My father's death during the pandemic which meant I could not be with him during his final days.

Three days in the hospital with another friend who needed emergency surgery while we were on vacation.

Somewhere in here the chronic stress triggered my immune system to attack my hair follicles resulting in alopecia universalis. All of my hair fell out. Every. Single. Strand.

I have loved Life is Good’s origin story, its messaging and its unabashed embrace of hope and positive thinking. I have actively chosen Life is Good t-shirts to wear on my darkest days. It helped.

So when I a cry over this recent loss of identity and the bald nature of my body I look for ways to remind myself that life is still good.

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Life is good.

plume of dark blue and black. To the left of the bunting was a black burnian warbler. This bird had bright orange, black, white and yellow plumage.

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Life is good.
I’d like to thank all of the maintainers that worked on the trail last year. Below is a list of the maintainers that worked 40 or more hours and the hours they put in:

Matt Gentry 40
Mark Farrell 42
Bill Floyd 43
Julie Petruska 48
Theresa McDaniels 49
Mike Reilly 52
Jennie Reilly 52
Donna Logan 52
Caleb Fort 54
Sue Terwilliger 66
Jim Beeson 94
Georgia Shauette 101
Dave Horst 117
Bruce Agnew 117
Bill Neill 138
Theresa Witcher 303
Hommer Witcher 421
Jim Webb 612

Keeping the trail open and in good shape takes much effort from dozens of club members. It is often an appreciated job but I really do appreciate everyone’s work out there on the trail.

Jim Webb recently received the Volunteer of the Year award for the Virginia region from the Trail Conference. Jim is truly a dedicated trail worker. On most days he can be found somewhere out on our section of trail. Congratulations Jim! Well-deserved!

Here is an update on the work being done recently on the trail by the weekly work crews. In March we finished up on the trail improvements on the 2.5 mile section of trail south of Route 220 in Botetourt County. This section climbs up Tinker Mountain and goes south along the ridge line above Carvin’s Cove. It was a pleasant place to work since it is scenic and close to home for those in the Roanoke area. Since November we did 15 work hikes with a total of nearly 700 hours spent working there. We put in ten water bars and over 100 steps. We also added rock to muddy areas on the lower part of the trail. This section of trail is now safer and sustainable after the efforts of the trail workers there.

Starting in March we started work on some problem areas on the Andy Layne Trail in Botetourt County. We replaced the deck on the bridge across Little Catawba Creek as well as on the approach ramp to the bridge over Catawba Creek. The bridge was in particularly bad shape. The single railing was rotten and the bridge deck had a significant lean to one side. Unfortunately the lean was in the direction away from the railing. After finishing up on the Andy Layne Trail, in the near future we will be putting in work hikes on Catawba Mountain and Sawtooth Ridge.

The Konnorock trail crew will again be out working on the AT this year, after being suspended last year due to COVID. Due to continuing COVID concerns the crew will consist of just four paid staff members. No volunteers will be participating this year on the crew. The crew will be on our section of trail on July 22-29 and August 5-8 working on the relocation in the Mountain Lake wilderness area.

As you probably know, we have a work crew that goes on Mondays and occasionally on weekends. This crew tackles more difficult projects rather than routine maintenance. Types of projects include building stairs or bridges and constructing new trail. You may wonder how it is determined where to work on the trail and what type of trail structures are needed. While much of this evaluation process is based on long years of experience, there are actually resources available. I’d like to mention two of these.

A Trail Maintainers’ Report

Trail maintainers are volunteers who accept responsibility to maintain an assigned section of the trail.

Dale Vance, Don & Mickey Pellillo and Linda and I were able to clear limbs, brush, debris and pick up litter on our 4.3 mile Appalachian Trail section in Bland County. We started at Rt. 611. We lopped some branches overhanging the trail but mostly worked on clearing six trees that crossed the trail. We were able to clear them using hand saws; they ranged from 12 to 3 inches in diameter. One of the trees across the trail had 5 large sections. The drainage area looked in fair to good condition and we only did minor work on these. We put down a few logs to divert the water away from the trail. We picked up 4 Walmart bags of trash at Rt. 611 and 1 bag at Rt. 608.

We stopped at the shelter and it looked great. We left 3 rolls of toilet paper in the privy and brought some coffee cans to protect them. We also left some Clorox hand wipes and hand sanitizer for the shelter. The spring looked fine. We did clear a tree blocking the side trail to the spring and covered an unplanned side trail which might have been created by the tree blocking the primary trail to the spring. This side trail was not there last time we checked. Five of us were on the trail about 4 hours for a total of 20 man-hours worked.

We did another workday later that week. My wife Linda and I picked up two 33 gallon bags of trash at the Rt. 608 trail heads. We did both sides of the road where two streams flow. One bag was discarded trash and the other bag we filled with clean recyclables. In addition, we picked up trash 50 yards above and below the trail heads.

The first is the Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance manual. This manual is published by the ATC. It is a 230 page soft cover book written by Bob Proudmian, a true AT legend who I respectved very much. Bob died a few years back after a long career with the ATC. As the title suggests the book covers all aspects of the physical trail, from planning and laying out a trail relocation to constructing structures on the trail that will make it sustainable, such as steps and water bars. I consult this book most of all when dealing with trail problems.

The other publication I consult frequently is the Trail Construction and Maintenance Notebook published by the U.S. Forest Service. This book covers most of the same topics as the ATC manual. Though useful it does not go into as much detail.

One thing I have learned from working on the trail over the past twenty years is that it will always be a work in progress. The elements are constantly at work eroding the trail. There is always work to be done.
Diana Christopulos, Appalachian Trail

Part 1. Dentons and Campbells lead a 170-mile relocation of the Appalachian Trail

Diana Christopulos, Appalachian Trail

“You will notice that I am referring to the Appalachian Trail as a Project. That is what it is in its present stage. Some of our look upon the Appalachian Trail as a completed trail. In fact, it has been measured and blazed over its entire length and guide books printed to cover the entire trail. Such a situation may give the impression that the trail is completed, but it is far from completion.

It is safe to say that the section southwest from Roanoke to Iron Mountain near Damascus is the worst to be found in the whole length of the trail. . . . I defy anyone to find anything of a future standard of trail hiker except short stretches such as in Rocky Knob Park and The Pinnacles of Dan, and the Fisher’s Peak Area. These spots stand on their own merit, but they are connected by roads, mostly dirt but some gravelled and paved. All wilderness aspect is lost. The very nature of this section detracts from the use of the trail.

In view of this situation, I have attempted to revive interest in a relocation project to get the trail moved to the West. This trail would, as presently planned, leave the present route at Lambert’s Meadow and cross the Catawba Creek Valley to North Mountain. From the Juncture with the North Mountain Trail, the proposed route would follow in a general manner a line drawn to Hungry Mother State Park, and there cross over to Iron Mountain and rejoin the present trail.”

Report of the President, James W. Denton

1949 Annual Banquet of the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club

January 5, 1949

RATC’s founders worked closely with Myron Avery to lay out, mark and build the original Appalachian Trail around and south of Roanoke in the 1930s. Their responsibilities grew in the 1950s, as volunteers led by two extraordinary couples worked with federal agencies and others on a monumental undertaking – relocating about 250 miles of the AT all the way to the West Virginia border. It took almost 40 years to complete the project, but RATC made a great start in the 1950s.

Most of the original route was on private land east of the Blue Ridge, with little more than hand-dug footpaths protecting the pathway. Much of it also involved road-walking. As early as 1940, RATC club leaders and US Forest Service officials were advocating a complete relocation of the Appalachian Trail between Roanoke and the Tennessee border.

World War II put an end to trail building and most trail maintenance. When people like Earl Shaffer, the first documented thru hiker, headed for the AT after the war, it was poorly maintained and poorly marked.

Enter Jim and Mollie Denton as well as Tom and Charlene Campbell. They all joined RATC after the war and revived its leadership role in the southern half of Virginia. Three of the four (Tom Campbell and both Dentons) served as RATC presidents, and they were at the center of both a major trail relocation and the lively social scene of the club.

Since its founding by faculty and staff of Roanoke and Hollins colleges as well as a mostly-female hiking club called The Nomads, RATC was a social club composed of middle-class professionals. Photos of the Dentons and Campbells show bespectacled, fun-loving, nerd-like characters who loved the outdoors and organized much of their social lives around the club. The Campbells moved further north and became leaders in the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club by the late 1950s, and Tom was another key figure in their Outreach Program.

Tom Campbell was an accountant and former RATC club leader in both the RATC and the Appalachian Trail Conference’s Board of Managers, and where he would push for true completion of the Trail. “If I can find the time, I promise to make myself a nuisance by continually harping on the subject. Any work which we put in is one step toward the final goal.”

By the end of 1952, Jim Denton and Tom Campbell reported that 60 miles of the relocation had been completed, with an 11.2-mile section between Va 621 and Va 311 (current McAfee Knob parking) fully described. The section includes Dragon’s Tooth and was rougher than the current route. One advantage for hikers: they could be relocated to both Va 621 and Va 311.

By 1955 it was completed (not exactly!).

Mr. Cochran, Supervisor of the Jefferson National Forest, has agreed that the section of trail would be advisable to relocate the trail away from the Parkway it would be advisable to relocate the trail to best advantage. This route will be within the bounds of the Jefferson National Forest.

Mr. Cochran, Supervisor of the Jefferson National Forest, has received the plans and is satisfied with them. The section that the trail will come under the Appalachian Trailway Agreement.

[Cochran’s son, Bill, became the Outdoors reporter for the Roanoke Times, and he has donated many materials to the RATC archives.] With this much to work on, several of us have blazed a route from South Fork Road to Black Horse Tavern Gap. The Park Service, when they are ready to build the trail, will expect us to mark the trail so that their workmen can follow the route. This will entail several trips to the area, and I urge you to come out and help make this job have to do with the new Trail route. If this project goes through it will add a nice hiking section to our area and a good solution to a tough problem for so as the Appalachian Trail is concerned.

As he completed his second and final year as the club’s president, Denton noted that he was now a member of the Appalachian Trail Conference’s Board of Managers and where he would push for true completion of the Trail. “If I can find the time, I promise to make myself a nuisance by continually harping on the subject. Any work which we put in is one step toward the final goal.”

Accordingly, a project was developed to re-route the Trail far to the west in the Jefferson National Forest. First proposed in 1940, World War II delayed action, but in 1951 the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club began the work of scouting, locating, clearing and marking the new trail route. By 1955 it was completed (not exactly!).

The new, i.e. the present, route is an outstanding trail in a superb location.

The actual work of relocation was extremely challenging. Details from Tom Campbell will be part of a future article. Furthermore, the relocate route had just been completed in 1955 and would continue into the late 1980s. Stay tuned for more news from the RATC archives!

Archivist’s Note: For many years, the RATC’s archives lived in the basements of its former presidents. Thanks to people like Bill Gorgie, Blanche Brower, Dick Clark and Michael Vaughn, we have begun to assemble, inventory and scan the records since our founding in 1932. If you have records, photos or stories you want to share, please contact me at dianak16@earthlink.net.
**Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club**

**IF ACCEPTED FOR MEMBERSHIP, I AGREE TO:**

1. Support the objectives of the RATC
2. Abide by the rules of the national and state parks and forests
3. Respect the interests of the owner when on private property
4. Keep trails and woodlands free of litter, and
5. Abide by the instructions of the leader on group hikes and trips

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Dues are payable in January of each year. Make checks to “RATC” or use PayPal at ratc.org

Please send dues and any questions about money or membership to: Treasurer, PO Box 12282, Roanoke, VA  24024

RATC is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. Membership dues are tax-deductible

Please Note: To save costs, the Trail Blazer is provided electronically via email/link. Paper copies may be obtained via mail. Request a paper copy via treasurer@ratc.org or by calling 540-521-5435