

TRAIL BLAZER

NEWSLETTER OF THE ROANOKE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CLUB

SPRING 2021

The Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club is a recreational hiking association of volunteers who preserve and improve the Appalachian Trail as the nation's premier, continuous, long-distance footpath.

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.

- What better way to start my first Blazer newsletter contribution than to share with you articles about some outstanding volunteers and RATC partners!
- Homer and Therese Witcher and family members are recognized by the Park Service for their extraordinary work cleaning up a massive dump site.

- 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 Christopoulos 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 !



trail. This clean-up effort by the Witchers is one of those events that will stick in my memory forever. It's this sort of dedication that reaffirms my ultimate career goal... to be a volunteer for the National Park Service."

For their efforts the Witchers received a letter <below> of recognition from Wendy K. Janssen, Superintendent in the Forest Service. From all of us in RATC we congratulate Therese, Homer and the extended Witcher family.

Thank you all!

Service well-rendered

by Bill Neilan

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 approaching 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 spent the better part of a day cleaning up the mess. Fifty-two garbage bags, containing three hundred pounds of trash were hauled out of the thicket.

I am continually inspired by the dedication of our volunteers on the Appalachian National Scenic



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Appalachian National Scenic Trail
P.O. Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425

IN REPLY REFER TO
10.D.

January 27, 2021

Homer and Therese Witcher
204 Mimosa Street
Daleville, VA 24083

Dear Homer and Therese:

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail would like to take this opportunity to formally acknowledge the significant amount of work you and your family performed on January 24, 2021.

On Friday, January 22, Acting Chief Ranger Kurt Speers and ATC staff members Josh Kloehn and Conner McBane investigated a recently discovered illegal dump site near Daleville, Virginia. The dumpsite consisted mostly of food-based garbage, which was spread out over a fairly large area. It was obvious that this site was going to require a large-scale group effort to remove all of 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
Wendy K. Janssen
Superintendent

Digitally signed by
WENDY JANSSEN
Date: 2021.01.27
11:17:54 -05'00'



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.

At times, more than a path in the forest...

Hikers venture out for different reasons

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.

A special moment

by Butch Kelly

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

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

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.



The first bird was a brilliant scarlet tanager with a bright red body and ebony wings.

Below it on the right was an indigo bunting. It too had its breeding



plumage 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.



Photo Credit: Wikipedia

I just opened my jaw and gaped at this scene above me. I was so shocked to see these three bird species together that I never lifted my camera.

It is a memory I'll treasure forever.

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.



This tragedy was preceded, and followed, by chronic and traumatic stress events such as my husband's ten year battle with illness (30+ ER visits and hospitalizations and 3 surgeries).

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



So when I 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.

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.



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.

After my first hike up McAfee, I joined the RATC and eventually participated in several group hikes organized via Meetup. I covered all three of the local Triple Crown hikes and then some. I hiked alone, and I hiked with friends, I joined group hikes



March 21, 2020

on which I met like-minded folks and shared an day with them.

On March 21, 2020 I joined an sunset hike to Tinker Cliffs; the group left the Andy Layne trailhead late in the afternoon. The sunset was spectacular that night, and I happened to meet an especially-like minded lady. A year to the day later, we hiked back to Tinker Cliffs and got married there.

It all started with a hike.



March 21, 2021

Trail Supervisor's Report

by Mike Vaughn

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 McDaniel	49
Mike Reilly	52
Jennie Reilly	52
Donna Logan	52
Caleb Fort	54
Sue Terwilliger	66
Jim Beeson	94
Georgia Shaurette	101
Dave Horst	111
Bruce Agnew	117
Bill Neilan	138
Therese Witcher	303
Homer 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 unappreciated 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 ATC. 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 decking 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 rotted 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 Konnarock 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.

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 Proudman, a true AT legend who I respected 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

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 areas



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.

by Walter Shroyer

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.



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

Diana Christopulos,
RATC Archivist

“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 us 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 interest to the 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 merits, but they are connected by roads, mostly dirt but some graveled 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 handshake agreements 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 outdoors 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 there is a shelter named after them on the PATC section. Tom Campbell was an accountant at the Norfolk and Southern Railroad, then headquartered in Roanoke, and he remained a leader in both the RATC and the Appalachian Trail Conference until the mid-1970s. A shelter near McAfee Knob is named after him.

Although it differs substantially from the current route, the hallmark of this massive relocation is the RATC’s partnership with federal and state agencies to assure a permanent, protected footpath with significant wilderness elements. For example, Denton’s 1949 proposed route left Tinker Mountain, omitting McAfee Knob in favor of US Forest Service land on North Mountain (the current North Mountain Trail). The footpath then generally followed Forest Service property to Hungry Mother State Park and on to Damascus.

On the northernmost part of the RATC section, from Black Horse Gap to Salt Pond, Denton and others worked with both the National Park Service and the US Forest Service to move the AT away from the Blue Ridge Parkway. Here is how Denton described the plan at RATC’s 1949 Annual Meeting:

“As most of you know, the Blue Ridge Parkway has all but taken the route of the Appalachian Trail in this section. I proposed to Mr. Avery, chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference, that a relocation could be made away from the parkway and a wilderness aspect of the trail. On this suggestion, Mr. Avery organized a meeting at which several of our members, Mr. Weems, Supervisor of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Mr. John. Sieker, Chief, Division of Land and Recreation, of the United State Forest Service, were present. It was agreed that since the Park Service was obligated 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 agreed that the route is satisfactory to his office and that the section of trail would 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 Pond 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 when this job has to be done. If this project goes through it will add a nice hiking section to our area and a good solution to a tough problem so far 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.”

By the end of 1952, Jim Denton and Tom Campbell reported that 60 miles of the relocation had been completed, with an 11.29-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 take a bus to both Va 621 and Va 311. Denton and Campbell recommended leaving a car at Va 311, taking the bus to Va 621 and walking back to their cars. And they asked for help in creating a good impression with local residents:

It should be remembered that part of the Trail is on privately-owned land. If any Trail traveler sees any of the people along the route, please make it a point to have a talk with them and let them know what you are doing. The Roanoke A.T.C. has had to do quite a bit of missionary work along this relocation and any ‘advertising’ that the hiker can do and good will he can create will be welcome.

The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club’s 1960 AT guide described

the results of this relocation:

“The original AT route] afforded some outstanding views and access to the remarkable Pinnacles of Dan and the Dan River Gorge, as well as Fishers Peak. However, with the gradual improvement of old roads and resultant increasing use, and the development of the Blue Ridge Parkway virtually along the Trail route, it became clear it was no longer a suitable location.”

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 relocation had just begun 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 Gordge, 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.

TRAIL BLAZER

Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club

PO Box 12282

ROANOKE VA 24024-2282

CHANGE SERVICE

REQUESTED

Roanoke Appalachian

IF ACCEPTED FOR MEMBERSHIP, I AGREE TO:

Trail Club Application

New and Renewal

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

Name(s)	New Member Packet Fee:	\$5	_____
Address	Individual # of years	x \$15	_____
	Family # of years	x \$20	_____
City	Individual life membership	x \$250	_____
State	Family life membership	x \$300	_____
Zip	Donation	\$	_____
Phone	Total Amount Enclosed	\$	_____
Email			

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