Appalachian Trail thrives for 75 years with volunteer help

By Karen Chavez
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ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Howard McDonald doesn't carry a cellphone or a camera when he hikes some of the prettiest mountain country on Earth. The way McDonald sees and savors the forests of the Appalachian Trail is from the sweaty side of a cross-cut saw and a Hazel hoe.

At age 86, McDonald still heads out on the trail every week to clear brush and blow-downs, install stone steps and replace wooden trail posts that some campers decide to pull up and burn for firewood. It's the same thing he's been doing — without pay — for the past 20 years.

He is part of the front line of volunteers who built the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail and who continue to nurture the mighty footpath as it celebrates its 75th anniversary.

Amid the related partying that will transpire, sight shouldn't be lost on how the trail was built and continues to thrive, said Andrew Downs of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the nonprofit based in Asheville that cares for the trail's Southern section.

"Volunteers conceptualized and built the Appalachian Trail. It is maintained and managed by volunteers," he said.

"It is one of greatest monuments to volunteerism in America. The Appalachian Trail has the second-most volunteer hours logged by any one national park in country (the first is Golden Gate in San Francisco)."

"A lot of people assume it's the National Park Service or the Forest Service who's paying people to clear blow down trees, but that's not the case — it's volunteers.

Without the passion of hardworking, selfless people like McDonald, there would be no trail, Downs said.

"I've been doing this 20 years, every Friday with a crew of 20 people, weather permitting," said McDonald, a retired engineer who volunteers with the trail maintenance crew of the Carolina Mountain Club.

"I like to make stuff, so I'm still doing it," McDonald said. "Getting out gives you exercise and keeps you moving around. It's an extremely satisfying thing to build new trails or fix old ones. It's healthy and extremely satisfying."

Although the Appalachian Trail, which runs through 14 states from Springer Mountain, Ga., to Mount Katahdin, Maine, is a unit of the National Park Service, 100 percent of the trail maintenance work is done by volunteers, Downs said. The trail receives some 2 million to 3 million visitors a year, with about 2,500 attempting a "thru-hike," or an end-to-end hike of the trail, and about 500 completing the grueling hike each year.

Today, more than 6,000 volunteers work on the trail, which runs across the spine of the Appalachians, putting in 250,000 hours of labor a year, said Brian King with the AT Conservancy in Harpers Ferry, W.Va.

The idea for the Appalachian Trail began with the germ of an idea from the philosopher-forester Benton MacKaye.

In October 1921, MacKaye, also a newspaper editor, published "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning" in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects. The piece advocating for a wilderness footpath is considered the birth of the Appalachian Trail, Downs said.

"His ideas lit the fire. He was the philosopher and one of the founders of the Wilderness Society," Downs said.

The years after the Civil War also contributed to the growth in hiking clubs and the interest for people to venture beyond their backyards, said Jay Leutze, author of "Stand Up That Mountain," and keynote speaker at a Tuesday night celebration of the trail's milestone.

"Men came home from the war and talked about other beautiful parts of the country," he said. "People began to look beyond their hollers and ridges, and the idea became to build a ridge line hiking trail along the Eastern seaboard in places relatively wild. It fell to volunteers to get permission from landowners."

During this same era, there was growing interest in protecting public land. In 1911, the Weeks Act established the half-million-acre Pisgah National Forest in WNC, which helped to form the U.S. Forest Service in the East. Inspired North Carolinians rallied to form the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934; the Blue Ridge Parkway was born in 1935.

"The two visions came together. You could imagine walking from Pisgah National Forest to Shenandoah, and eventually to the Adirondacks (New York) and the White Mountains (New Hampshire)," Leutze said. "The world started seeming smaller."

Led largely by hiking clubs and the work of the AT Conservancy, the trail took 15 years to complete, King said.

"They started piecing together existing trails in 1922 in New York and New England," he said. "Everything was finished in 1936 except for two miles in Maine. The Civilian Conservation Corps crew finished it 75 years ago (today)."

There are 31 hiking clubs that provide volunteers for the continual construction, maintenance of care of the trail, Downs said.

Probably the biggest is the CMC, which was formed 80 years ago and whose members helped to chain-saw, bushwhack and build the trail in the 1920s and '30s. Today the club has about 1,000 members.

"A past generation took it upon themselves to establish this trail," Downs said. "We're really standing on pretty strong shoulders. It's an important legacy to carry on and an important responsibility."



Howard McDonald, 86, takes inventory of posts and trail markers along the Appalachian Trail. JOHN FLETCHER/GANNETT



Jeremy Taylor and Sarah Coppa perform maintenance on the Appalachian Trail. ADAM BRIMER/ KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL/AP