

Norm's Niche

What I Did on My Summer Vacation

by **Norman Detweiler**
Staff Writer

I went for a walk – a 117-mile walk along the Appalachian Trail from just north of the Hudson River to the Delaware Water Gap.

Why?

I wanted to see some beautiful scenery, get a little exercise and have an adventure.

I wanted to get back to the most basic elements of my existence and to a place where I feel at home and where I am in awe of the world around me. The mountains and the woods are a very peaceful place for me and help remind of who I am.

I think Henry David Thoreau said it best when he talked about his time at Walden Pond.

"I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow of life..."

Thoreau had a way with words that is rarely seen today.

I met a lot of friendly people on the trail. Everyone was helpful

and willing to share information as to where to find good water or the best ice cream.

Water, food and shelter highlighted most conversations. It doesn't get much more basic or deliberate than that.

I spent most days walking 10 to 15 miles and enjoying the greenery and its soothing effects. Around every turn there were beautiful views and something new to distract me from the 50-pound-plus backpack I was carrying. There were miles of rocky ridgelines overlooking remote lakes and distant mountains. The scenery was always changing and it pulled me onward. Yes, I did walk through swamps. But there were boardwalks on which to tread.

The people I saw every day ranged in age from a reluctant group of youths from a YMCA camp to two older women, one who – I'm guessing – was in her 70s. One of the women happened to be taking a picture of a butterfly when our paths crossed, and she said the other woman's husband had died recently.

The majority of the hikers I spotted looked to be in their 20s, an age bracket that seems good for through-hiking.

Through-hiking is to hike a trail in its entirety. The Appalachian Trail is more than 2,170 miles long and runs from Maine to Georgia. The thought of walking this entire distance never even crossed my mind until my first night on the trail when I camped with several people who were doing just that. They'd been on the trail for a couple months and were well versed in the art of living off the land. They gave me a crash course on surviving the next 11 days.

They showed me where the spring was at our campsite. It was barely a puddle, but it was flowing. The water was cold and, after being filtered or otherwise treated, safe to drink. They told me the section that I was hiking was one of the driest on the trail.

Water is the most precious commodity and making sure that I had enough for each leg of the journey was foremost in my mind. I only ran out once but knew that I would come across some early in the next day's hike.

It's a strange feeling taking that last cool sip and knowing that it would be a three-mile walk the next morning before I'd wet my palate again. And it was even more surreal when I came off of the trail one night and stayed in a motel.

The first thing the desk clerk asked me was if I had heard that the stock market had fallen 500 points.

Here I was wondering where my next source of water would come from while he worried about the market. It's as if we lived in different worlds.

It was also quite strange wading across rivers full of yellow taxi cabs in New York City one minute and then wandering through the lush green vegetation of the Appalachian Trail an hour later.

I was able to take public transportation to get to the start of my walk. I took SEPTA to New Jersey Transit, which dumped me in Penn Station. From there I walked to Grand Central Station and took the Metro-North to Peekskill, N.Y. From there it was a five-mile hike to the Appalachian Trail.

There are a couple of reasons I decided to make this my first column. Students here at Montco may be in position to tackle an adventure like this because it's fairly inexpensive and a long section of the trail could fill a summer break. The other reason is that I attribute my physical well-being to a course I took at a community college almost 30 years ago. By the way, I turned 50 on July 29. The course provided me

with the knowledge that has kept me in good-enough shape over the years. Here at Montco, the course is ESW 146: Conditioning, Weight Training and Weight Control.

The Appalachian Trail is physically challenging. It's rocky and, according to people I met along the way, the hardest of the big three trails in America (the other two are the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide trails). My feet are still sore and my legs still ache as I type this. But the beautiful and diverse landscapes and the interesting people made this one of the best trips I've ever taken. I can't recommend hiking enough to anyone who wants a challenge and an adventure.

