



A Hike of Their Own

BY JUDITH MCGUIRE

Strider and John, two thirtyish section hikers, joined me at Bobblets Gap Shelter in mid May 2007. After our discussions of where we came from, where we were going, and Trail complaints, Strider leaned over to me meaningfully and asked, “So how *old* are you anyway?” When I answered, “fifty-seven” he exclaimed, “you’re older than my mother! She could never do this.” To which I replied, “you never know.”

Each year, almost unnoticed, dozens of gray-haired ladies leave Springer for Katahdin to have the time of their lives. Some, of course, drop out but since the turn of the century 10 to 15 women over 50 years old have completed thru-hikes every year. The oldest woman to thru-hike so far has been Nancy “Magellan” Gowler, who did her second thru-hike in 2007 at the age of 71. Emma “Grandma” Gatewood was the first woman to do a solo thru-hike in 1955 at 67.

We’re far from your typical thru-hiker, representing less than three percent (160) of thru-hikers on record, but in many ways we’re no different from any other demographic group on the Trail. Some are fast, some slow; some are group-oriented, some there for the solitude; some have had extensive backpacking experience while others are novices. What is remarkable about older women, though, is their strong sense of self and feeling that being an older woman should not be an impediment to hiking the Appalachian Trail. They are ordinary women who accomplished an extraordinary task.



LEFT: Donna “Mosey” Stowe completed her thru-hike at 68 years old. ABOVE: Emma “Grandma” Gatewood completed two thru-hikes of the A.T., the first when she was 67.



Susan “Righty” Arzberger got a leave of absence from her job at Wal-Mart in 2006 to hike the Trail at the age of 63 with her daughter Kelley “Lefty” Mullin. Both women are breast cancer survivors (guess which breast) and wanted to show everyone that cancer isn’t the end of the world, plus they were both keen for the adventure. “Righty” said that “Lefty” precipitated the hike—“ I’m the one who talked about it for year after year. Then [my daughter] said, ‘put your foot where your mouth is.’” She hadn’t had much backpacking experience before her thru-hike and found that, “the daily grind was much harder than I thought it would be [but] when we started I decided we were going to finish, I think that’s the attitude you have to have. If you go out thinking you might not finish then you won’t.”



Beth “Cheddar” Denton was 51 when she did a thru-hike in 2002, breaking up her hike so she could see her children off to the Marines. She says, “I’ve never been athletic, I never was that strong, but I’ve always loved hiking. We were a backpacking family. Ever since I first heard about the A.T., I’ve wanted to do it.” Recovering emotionally from a difficult divorce, living on a shoestring budget, and recuperating from a serious kidney infection, she wanted to hike the A.T more than anything else. She was determined to get going on her chosen start date so she literally rose from her sickbed to start the Trail, with lots of help from her 2001 thru-hiker son. She admits, “I was unprepared. I just up and went. I got in shape on the Trail.” Since her thru-hike she has taken on other adventures: teaching a year in Korea and overseas real estate investments. She’d like to do a thru-hike every 10 years.



Margaret “Bluevist” Gibson was 59 when she hiked the A.T. in 2002. She had stayed home to raise her son and done some security guard work but eventually retired. She and her husband completed a section hike between 1980 and 1999. She wanted to hike solo because, “I’m an accommodator. If I hiked with someone else I knew my hike would become their hike. It negates the purpose of being out there.” She has since done the northern part of the Long Trail, the Northville Placid Trail, and the Finger Lakes Trail.



Gloria “Walk in Glory” Marquez turned 60 when she was near Harpers Ferry on her 2002 thru-hike. She is a contract nurse who moves around the country on assignment. She’s five feet tall and carried a 40–50 pound pack. Gloria had no previous backpacking experience and she called the hike “on the job training.” “I thought it would be really cool turning 60 on the Trail,” she said. She actually prefers hiking alone but liked the company at night. “Overall it was fun, but it’s truly putting one foot ahead of the other. I got down to walking to the next tree, then the next rock. It’s not just a physical feat, it’s a matter of will.” She believes that the Trail gave “trust that things will work out, trust that others (people, or God, or fate) will provide the help you need.” Gloria is currently preparing to run in her first marathon. She’s also thinking of bicycling across the country and hiking the El Camino.

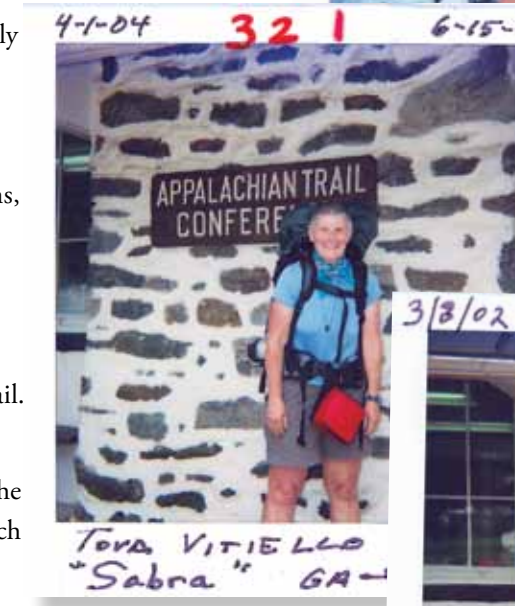
Barb “Late Start” Nash had hardly done any backpacking before she planned her flip-flop hike in 2004 at the age of 54. She had retired from a computer job at Verizon the previous November and managed to link up with an experienced backpacker who became her hiking partner and the logistical mastermind of the trip. Because her parents had chronic diseases at the end of their lives, she felt she had to seize the moment and not miss her chance to hike the A.T. “I’m no athlete; I’m just everybody, I’m just you,” she said. Barb hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in 2009.



Martha “Hareball” Paddock was a NOBO in 2005 at the age of 53. This was her second backpacking trip; the first one had been 10 years before. She had no equipment when she started planning. “I went to an outfitter and told them my plans and they looked at me like ‘you gotta be kidding’, which wasn’t much fun, but I’m used to it because of my age.” She’s always been in good shape, she noted, but “you have to work up to 20 miles. “I don’t think [the thru-hike] changed the way I feel about myself. I was pretty confident before. I think it just kind of added to it. What it did was give me a greater appreciation of other personalities,” she said.



Donna “Mosey” Stowe was 68 and long retired when she completed her thru-hike in 2004. Although she had hiked 250 miles on the A.T. previously, she hadn’t done any long distance backpacking before. She did her thru-hike because a previous thru-hiker (three years younger) was contemplating a repeat performance and asked her if she was interested. “I jumped at it,” she said. Ironically this partner dropped out early but Mosey latched onto some other women a week later and finished with one of them. She says she couldn’t have done it without a hiking partner, mostly for the encouragement. She was very slow, she said, and needed help on several sections, but someone was always there to help her when she needed it. When people asked her on the A.T. what she was going to do afterwards, she would reply, “take organized bus trips and sit around drinking margaritas.” Instead she has hiked the Florida Trail and just returned from hiking 430 miles of the Ice Age Trail.



Tova “Sabra” Vitiello a retired college professor, hiked the Trail in 2004 at the age of 59 because she wanted to get in touch with her physical side, having favored the intellectual side for many years. “My knees were starting to bother me,” and she thought to herself, “if I don’t hike the Trail now I may never do it.” She started out with a group of women who had gotten together over the internet but ended up by herself, although she often socialized at shelters with others. She said she was a very slow hiker, so slow, in fact, that she had to start before dawn to get up to Katahdin and back by the requisite exit time. To her the most important benefit of the Trail was to “fully understand the concept ‘one



with nature' and how to live very simply and be content." Unique among these women, Tova felt that the Trail changed her. She's a better listener now and enjoys solitude much more. Since her thru-hike, "Sabra" has helped rebuild her remote log cabin, doing much of the physical labor herself.

Christina "Sunshine" Weisberg was 60 when she hiked in 2002. She is a nurse who, "was running away from the intensive care unit," she said. She had zero backpacking experience. "I had to work and was supporting three kids, but I had to do it," she said. She never doubted that she would be successful. "I had this inner feeling... I could do it. Physically I was in good shape," she said, "although I realized, that's not what it takes. It's more mental than anything." She preferred hiking by herself. "I just wanted to experience total quietness and listen to me for a change. I can't imagine doing it any other way." Christina hopes to walk the Way of St. James in the Pyrenees for her next feat.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to older women going on the Trail is fear. Most of these women, however, were not afraid. As Tova said, "if somebody wants to rape or kill somebody, why would they go to the trouble of going to the Appalachian Trail?" Gloria, who started out very fearful, "talked and breathed herself" out of her fear. Most women said they simply felt safe on the Trail. All the women said that age shouldn't get in the way of a thru-hike. As "Sunshine" said, "other people were impressed with my age; I don't think I really was. I never think of myself as an older woman. I never think of myself as old."

There are many advantages to thru-hiking as an older woman. "Righty" spoke for many women when she said, "we're used to putting up with a lot of difficulty and pushing through things. Your mental attitude is as important as your physical and the mental comes with age and experience." "Walk in Glory" felt that one advantage to older women is boosting self-confidence. She now believes she can do anything she wants by telling herself, "if I did that...I can do this."

"Just do it," is the advice these women gave to other older women contemplating a thru-hike. Some advised them not to think of it as hiking the whole Trail but rather as one step, one day, one rest stop at a time so as not to get overwhelmed. "Sunshine" gave a good rationale for doing it sooner rather than later. "At the time it didn't really make sense," she said. "I couldn't really afford it. There was this 'let me first retire and then I'll do it.' But two years ago I herniated a disk and the probability of hiking 2,000 miles with a backpack is not good. I'm so happy I followed my feeling and went with it."

Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail has been enormously satisfying for many older women. Physically a thru-hike might be a little harder for them than for younger women or men, but the rewards make it all worthwhile. As "Hareball" said, "it's one of the most empowering and humbling things I've ever done." One wonders why this has been kept such a secret from older women until now.

Judith "Judo" McGuire completed her thru-hike in 2007.

To request a list of women over 50 who have hiked the entire A.T. recently and are willing to answer questions and give advice to prospective hikers, contact: info@appalachiantrail.org.

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