



Safe Passage

The Kennebec River Ferry

BY BOB PROUDMAN

The Kennebec River in Maine is the most difficult river crossing along the entire Appalachian Trail. The river can vary in depth and velocity, depending on the variability of dam releases from the hydroelectric facility upstream, and at about 250 feet wide, the water can go from shallow to more than six feet, making fording extremely dangerous.

In the 1930s, when the A.T. was first laid out in Maine, Ralph Sterling owned a hotel in the small village of Caratunk. He operated a ferry that hunters, fishermen and hikers used to cross the river at this location. He also owned and operated Sterling's Pierce Pond Camps, a stopover popular since the 19th century. It is still in operation adjacent to the Trail corridor under the name Carrying Place Camps. Despite extensive Trail relocations throughout Maine in the 1980s and 90s, the Trail has continued to cross the Kennebec near Caratunk; however, the ferry service was discontinued only a few years after the A.T. was opened. Afterwards, hikers forded the river, often fashioned rafts from sticks of pulpwood left over from annual river drives, or took a 30-mile road detour.

Many more hikers began flocking to America's trails, and hiking boomed in the 1970s. Thru-hiking the A.T., once considered a rare stunt, grew by leaps and bounds so that hundreds began to attempt it annually. This led to a predicament at the Kennebec River: How do you manage a regular hiker crossing at the A.T.'s largest unbridged stream? At least four National Park Service (NPS) A.T. park managers have questioned the safety of the Kennebec River Crossing.

The challenge was first posed by NPS A.T. park manager David A. Richie, who section-hiked the A.T. and forded the river with his son in 1985. He wrote, with some understatement, in a letter to then Maine A.T. Club (MATC) president David B. Field, "We were frightened by the experience and wonder how MATC and ATC can persist in a casual attitude toward the evident danger involved, particularly for less athletic and capable hikers." Those words proved to be prophetic.

PHOTO BY ISAAC WIEGMANN

In the years before the Kennebec ferry became an official route on the A.T., hikers forded the river at a great risk to their personal safety.



On August 26, 1985, a woman drowned in the Kennebec while attempting to ford the river with her husband. Alice and George FERENCE had begun walking the entire A.T. in 1977, doing annual section-hikes of the Trail from south to north each year. A woman of slight build, Alice went under in the strong current with the waist band of her frame pack still attached. After removing his own pack and floating it in front of him to reach the east bank, George FERENCE rescued his wife, dragged her to shore and rendered CPR, but to no avail. She had drowned. In the incident report prepared by the Maine Wardens Service, he recalled that his wife had panicked before being swept downstream in the strong current.

ATC and MATC moved quickly to establish a ferry service at the river. The ATC Board of Managers—recognizing that thru-hikers had been mistakenly assuming that fording the Kennebec was sanctioned by ATC—voted in 1986 to encourage the use of the ferry and recognize use of the ferry as the official route for those hiking the A.T. Alternatives (including major Trail relocations) for increasing the safety of the crossing were studied from 1992 to 1994. Engineering studies conducted from 1989 to 1994 concluded that, while a bridge would solve the problem, it would be a major expense and a major incursion onto the Trail's primitive character.

In October 1985, ATC executive director Laurence R. Van Meter, wrote George FERENCE expressing the condolences of the Appalachian Trail community. Despite the horror of his experience, FERENCE went on to complete the A.T. alone. At ATC's suggestion, both he and his late wife were recognized as having completed the entire Trail. He later became a major donor and member of ATC's Benton MacKaye Society.

In 1986, MATC and ATC hired Steve Longley, owner and operator of Rivers and Trails Northeast, Inc., to provide ferry service from May to September. Through 2007, with the exception of a single season, he provided the ferry service each year. In recognition of more than twenty years of service, and for his ardent persuasion of thru-hikers to follow safe practices, Longley was recognized in November 2007 as the ATC New England Region's "Partner of the Year" for his service to A.T. hikers. The award was presented to him personally by the MATC. This is the first time an A.T. contractor has received such recognition.

During the 20 years the ferry was in service, 19,000 hikers were safely delivered across the river. A white blaze on each canoe serves as a reminder that the ferry is the official route of the Trail.

During the peak summer season, Rivers and Trails Northeast maintained a rigorous schedule of twice-daily canoe crossings for A.T. hikers, with a staff of Maine Guides whose qualifications met or exceeded Maine Warden Service and U.S. Coast Guard standards. To discourage fording, the service is provided free to hikers, who must wear personal flotation devices. At Longley's insistence, packs were not ferried for hikers who were determined to ford despite the danger.

Longley cultivated A.T. hikers and promoted ATC and MATC relationships. Unfortunately, Rivers and Trails Northeast has decided not to renew its contract in 2008. "While this is our last 'official' presence... the spirit of the river crossing will forever remain a vital and historic part of the Appalachian Trail hiking experience," said Longley who also expressed his thanks to all who allowed him the opportunity to serve those who crossed safely on the ferry. ATC is seeking a new provider for this vital service, which is funded by ATC except for an annual \$3,500 fee levied on the power company by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

For information, contact Matt Stevens, ATC New England Regional Office, at mstevens@appalachiantrail.org.



In addition to the ferry, Steve Longley (above) also offered free shuttles, a bunkhouse, daily weather

reports, and the use of showers and laundry facilities in an effort to accommodate hikers.

PHOTOS BY TIMOTHY CUMMINGS