

A SECTION HIKE ...Revisiting childhood pleasures + how much pain

How many interesting experiences in life start simply - a phone call - an e-mail? Colorado friend Louis B contacted me in mid-September with the proposition of spending 3 or 4 days in mid-October section-hiking the Appalachian Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. His son Chris (AKA **Diode**, his AT trail name) was well underway with the completion of his south-bound segment of the trail, having started August 23 in Harpers Ferry. Chris had agreed to let us join him for a few days (and slow him down in the extreme from his usual 20-miles-per-day hiking pace). Louis B was providing plenty of lead time - four weeks - which also permitted the flexibility for several iterations of itinerary revision, always advisable when one of those whose schedules you are attempting to coordinate is in more-or-less constant motion...

Getting ready for the hike, in the weeks leading up to our departure, required an (initially) half-hearted inventory of my camping equipment, trying to narrow down what I owned that was serviceable and suited for even a short expedition and what was missing. Of course, the next questions (for me, anyway) were: Buy? Borrow? - or - Do without? I used the word initially, since - as the date of our departure neared - these sorts of outfitting questions gradually acquired a sort of earnestness that forgot half-hearted and remembered urgent...

I found in my possession a three-season sleeping bag and Therm-a-Rest, Nalgene bottle, and various and sundry other camping/backpacking items. However, finding myself without hiking footwear, waterproof pack cover, compact cook kit, and waterproof gear bag (for food storage) - I resorted to the several of the nearest local outfitters to fill in the gaps in my equipment needs. Visiting one of the outfitters in search of one specific item, a sales associate approached me to ask if I needed help finding anything. I said: "Yeah. You got any **Darn Tough** socks?" He gave me a wry expression and pulled up his trouser cuff and said, "I'm *wearing* a pair but we don't carry them."

Thinking back, my first backpacking trip was probably around fifth grade. You could join the Boy Scouts one month before your eleventh birthday, so - for me - that would have been December of 1964. Without going into too much detail I will say that backpacking was not a terribly popular activity then. Those of us who did it at all had a no-frills approach (because that seemed to be the only approach known and practiced

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at the time). I never saw anything resembling hiking boots. Most of us wore work boots like construction laborers used and sprayed them with **ScotchGard** for water-resistance. Junior guys usually bought the smaller, not very sophisticated cotton duck packs called **Yucca Packs**. Over time, we learned that a pack frame made a world of difference in stiffening and balancing your load, since - without one - the pack would deform and slump and weight distribution got out of control fast. Eventually, almost all of the older Scouts ended up with the same rig: a large, roomy, (also cotton duck) backpack with external pockets called a **Camper pack**. The external aluminum frame of choice looked like a tall, gently curving, tubular aluminum ladder called a **Cruiser** pack frame.

On backpacking trips, we had the practice of dividing up shared items, often carrying tents, folding shovels, axes, bow saws, gallon jugs of water, all manner of foodstuffs including onions, carrots, potatoes, eggs, boxes of **Bisquick**, and godawfully-heavy cast iron dutch ovens for making casseroles and other dishes in a firepit. In summer of 1968 when I was fourteen, I backpacked for 10 days at **Philmont Scout Ranch** in Cimmaron, northern New Mexico. Three months earlier, I had finished the season as a wrestler at my Junior High school in the eighty-five pound weight category. Why am I telling you this? Because, when we weighed our packs at **Philmont** base camp before hitting the trails, mine weighed about the same as everyone else's: fifty pounds. Crazy as it sounds, I don't recall thinking there was anything extraordinary about someone *my size* carrying a pack *that size*. While packing, I used to roll my clothes and rubber-band them into tight cylinders. Tents and groundcloths were either rolled tightly or folded to conserve pack space and tent poles telescoped together into compact units. We bungeed our sleeping bag onto the bottom of our packs to the lower extensions of the tubular aluminum external frame. I had two pieces of foam rubber about an inch and a half thick that I inserted between the middle of my back and the pack frame which dramatically improved comfort. I had also rigged a web belt as a sort of pack waist-belt. Since backpacks did not come equipped with any personal fit sorts of features beyond two (adjustable-length) shoulder straps, the waist-belt addition also made a real contribution to comfort.

Backpacking and hiking in the sixties was sometimes fraught with minor hardship or undesirable weather conditions but - even so - my memories are generally good. On our shakedown hike before the **Philmont** expedition, we backpacked down into Linville Gorge - one of the most beautiful, but rugged areas of North Carolina. We

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were not following a trail as we descended the steep slope covered with a thick bed of leaves which held moisture well and blanketed the wet, composting soil beneath. Heavy as we were with our packs, steep and moist as the slope was, all of us ended up slipping many times and sliding intermittently down to the river at the floor of the gorge. We arrived wet and muddied to set up camp for the weekend. But Linville Gorge is wild and beautiful and it was all worth it. On another hike that summer at Philmont, we were following a high ridge when the weather quickly changed. We suddenly found ourselves hiking in snow flurries - in *July*! I could continue with the anecdotes but the memories are numerous...

After Boy Scouts, I didn't do much in the way of backpacking beyond reading a few good books and taking few short trips:

- 1985 backpacked into beaver ponds in the Maroon Bells above Aspen, CO in July; we made camp and fished for Rainbow Trout for two days; (some really good eating!)
- 1999 backpacked with three dads and four kids on weekend trip near Brevard, NC; too-wet conditions for fire-building led one adult to make use of white gas, setting himself on fire in the process; (he was lucky not to suffer lasting harm); while sleeping under the stars, that same adult had his ear nibbled by a mouse. (No. It wasn't me!)
- 2002 accompanied Nelly's CPCC Backpacking Class on a weekend outing in April; Our large mixed group parked at the Pisgah Center for Wildlife Education (Pisgah Forest, NC) and packed into our eventual campsite along a stream. Nelly and I went for a swim in the chilly waters; (memorable!)
- 2002 I read Hiking and Backpacking, by Eric Seaborg & Ellen Dudley
- 2004 I read A Walk in the Woods, by Bill Bryson
- 2012 I read Blind Courage, by Bill Irwin & David McCasland

Unbelievable as it seems, I finally discarded my old cotton duck Boy Scout **Camper** pack and external aluminum **Cruiser** frame two or three years back - my sentimentality having clung tenaciously to the tattered artifact of forty plus years ago with an inexplicable sort of nostalgic death-grip. But, when I contacted my oldest child Nelly Kate and asked if she would loan me her backpack, I really had no idea what I had gotten myself into. I guess here would be the place to insert the phrase:

Times have changed.

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On her next trip home, Nelly Kate brought her backpack and, sitting down with me, took a few minutes to review the pack's various features. Only later did I discover that her **Gregory Baltoro 70** backpack had garnered two Editor's Choice awards from **Backpacker** magazine. It seemed I might have the backpack base adequately covered...

Still, I felt I should acclimate somewhat to the unique activity that backpacking is in a fashion not only mental, but authentically physical. So, Tuesday afternoon, three days prior to hitting the AT, I decided to test-drive Nelly Kate's pack - fully-loaded - on the most challenging trail I knew of within an hour of home: **Crowder's Mountain**.

It was a sunny afternoon when I loaded Nelly Kate's pack and headed for the park. I filled my Nalgene bottle at the Visitors Center and started out. On the trail by 2:00, I checked pack fit and adjustment as I walked. Everything felt fine - balanced; weight evenly-distributed; comfortable. I clocked the time to assess my hiking pace with a loaded pack. Most of the **Crowder's** trail is easy to moderate until the final assault on the summit. That section ascends rapidly making use of nearly 400 steps of varying height - some greater than a foot. I was breathing hard and beginning to sweat when I reached the Radio transmission tower at the top, three miles from the parking lot. It was just under an hour. All things considered, the two-hour round-trip on the trail was a good workout, my confidence in the pack was cemented permanently in-place, and I concluded that 3 mph was a pretty fair pace for a no-longer-seasoned backpacker on a trail like **Crowder's** with a loaded pack.

Louis B arrived late the next night on his flight from Denver through Atlanta and I met him at the airport. We spent the next day making our final acquisitions of food items and any other last-minute things the local outfitter carried that we determined to be indispensable. Concerned that we might encounter rain, I committed to procure a pack cover to fit Nelly Kate's (large) backpack.

Day 1 Friday 12 October

We rose and packed and left Charlotte before 8:00, arriving in Asheville around 10:00. Finding parking in the deck off Walnut Street we ambled up onto Haywood and over two blocks to **Tupelo Honey Café** for a late breakfast. We weren't seated until 10:40, making us both slightly anxious; this since we had back-planned a 2-hour window to allow time for our Asheville to Fontana trip, not wishing to arrive late for our 1:15

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rendezvous with the shuttle to Clingman's. We may have had a nervous wait for a table, but there was little time wasted placing and receiving our order or enjoying our hearty meal. Well-fed, we were off and gone by 11:10.

After following I-40 west out of Asheville, we wheeled along the Great Smoky Mountains Expressway through sun-washed valleys until turning onto highway 28 which we drove along the winding, wooded path the remainder of the way to Fontana. We arrived early, bypassing the Visitor Center, crossing the Dam and turning onto the access road to the AT trail head on the far side of the lake. We doubled back, clocking the distance on the car's odometer: almost exactly a mile.

We parked and entered the Visitors Center, Louis B heading for the facilities while I began chatting with the volunteer staff. About this time, a late middle-aged woman entered and asked if I was Louis - which, of course, I replied I was. She introduced herself as Andrea, our shuttle driver. About this time, Louis B returned and relieved me of conversational responsibilities, at which time we attempted to clarify for Andrea the potential for mistaken identity - since, after all, it was Louis B who had made all the arrangements for the shuttle.

Following Andrea back outside to the parking lot, we loaded our equipment into her vehicle and boarded for the 2-hour drive to Clingman's Dome. In short order we learned that Andrea was trained as an architect, worked in the residential design practice area, and had been without any design-related work for the last two years, obligating her to take on the shuttle driver gig. She queried us re backcountry permits - required for overnight stays along the AT. Although Louis B had made these arrangements on-line ahead of time - just to be sure - we stopped at the **Hike Inn** and completed hard copy of the necessary paperwork and continued on our way.

We decided, more or less unanimously as I recall, to make a quick stop at the **McDonald's** on the outskirts of Cherokee. There, I had a chocolate shake and Louis B bought treats for **Diode** in the form of a double cheeseburger and apple pie. Leaving Cherokee, we climbed along route 441 to a left turn on Clingman's Dome Road, continuing our climb out of the lower, sun-bathed elevations into that dense, brooding mantle of cloud blanketing the summit.

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As I was later informed by **Diode**, **Clingman's Dome** - at 6,643 feet - is the highest point on the entire AT. It is also the third highest point in the United States east of the Mississippi. For this reason, it made perfect sense that for the entire trip from Fontana to our final ascent along **Clingman's Dome Road**, the peak figured as a sometimes distant but always conspicuous landmark, shrouded as it was in clouds and therefore, distinct from every other lower-lying (and therefore non-cloud-covered) peak and ridge within view. Sometime around 3:00 pm Friday we drove out of the sunshine and disappeared into that mysterious, foggy, cloud corona. It never occurred to me that, for the next several days, we would be *remaining* in the clouds.

The travel distance from the **McDonald's** in Cherokee to the parking lot at **Clingman's Dome** was perhaps a scant twenty miles. But around 3:20 or 3:25 we opened the shuttle doors in the parking lot to not only the dense cloud cover but air temps in the range of twenty or more degrees cooler and howling wind. Unloading our gear at the curb, we said our rather hasty goodbyes to Andrea and started rummaging in our packs for fleece pullovers and rain jackets.

Here B and A mysteriously became **Oxy-Lou** and **Ori-Lou** - trail handles created years ago to manage our same-name difficulties and in anticipation of this hike with a sort of karmic prescience. Since Louis B is from the west, he covered the *occidental* post (hence, **Oxy**) while Louis A (yours truly), hailing from the east, held down the *oriental* station (**Ori**). In conference, we decided that one of us should start up the steep walk toward the summit of **Clingman's** to see if **Diode** was in the neighborhood.

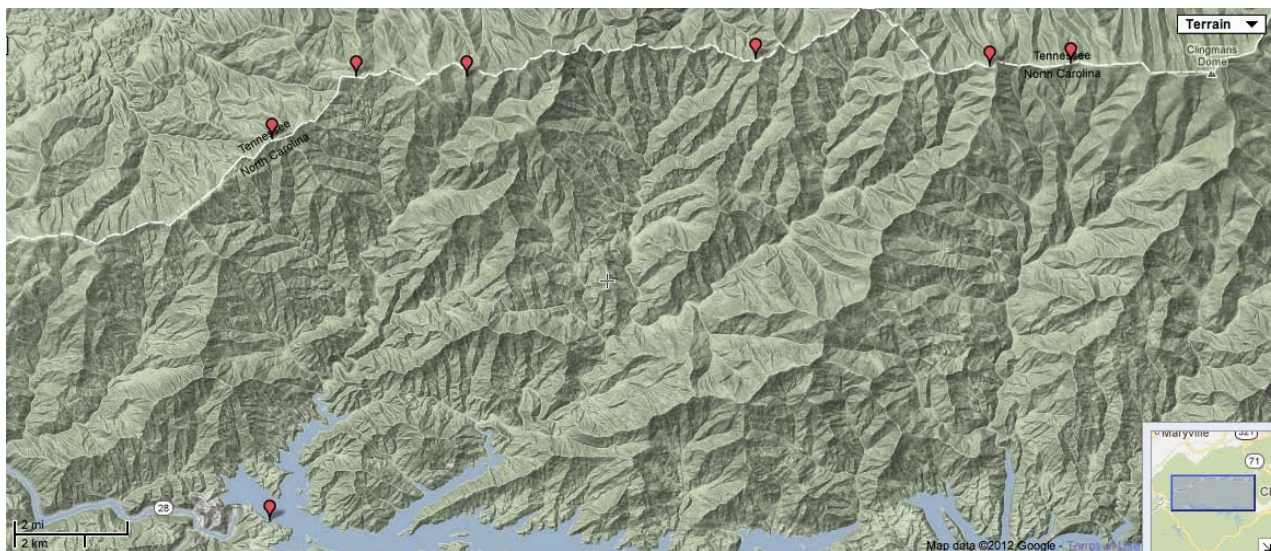
Volunteering, I crossed the parking lot and had barely reached the walk when who should I spy but **Diode** himself descending the paved path? "**Diode!**" I exclaimed. (He told us later that - before seeing me coming up the sidewalk toward him - the thought crossed his mind: "Who here knows my trail name???") So, all told, our arrival, unpacking, donning warmer clothing and making contact with **Diode** probably consumed all of five minutes. We concluded that our trip planning, logistics and scheduling coordinator deserved kudos...

Oxy handed off his bag of thru-hiker fast-food treats and we capitalized on photo-ops before hoisting our packs and starting up the steep, half-mile walk to the tower atop **Clingman's Dome**. In spite of being paved, this segment - owing to its extraordinary steepness - was probably the most strenuous hiking we would do all day. Leaving our packs at the base of the tower, we followed the winding ramp to the

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top of the tower, from whence we could enjoy even higher-velocity winds and - thanks to the cloud-cover - even worse visibility (an added bonus, free-of-charge).

In spite of the strange beauty of the high-elevation spruce-fir rainforest habitat surrounding us at close-range, we chose not to remain up there battered by the wind for long. So descending the ramp around 3:45, we grabbed our packs and departed the pavement, leaving behind that and all other vestiges of civilization along the Appalachian Trail. Our first day of hiking would only consume about 2 hours and cover - including the half-mile climb to the summit of *Clingman's* - about 3.6 miles. After hiking through the foggy cloudscape and losing over 1100 feet in elevation, we



arrived at **Double Spring Gap** to an unoccupied shelter (elevation 5511 feet). It was sometime before 6:00 pm.

We were first at the shelter and unrolled sleeping pads and bags on one or the other of the two platforms - one about eighteen inches above the dirt floor and the other around eye level. We immediately set about making dinner, sun-dried tomato and basil fusilli out of a box with a packet of spicy hot tuna thrown-in for good measure. Neither a bad-tasting nor a difficult meal to prepare. We cleaned up and hung our food in dry storage bags on the high cables fifty feet from the shelter, provided for isolating food items (and whatever else might have odors) from bears and other night-time foragers from the animal kingdom.

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I was in bed before 9:00 pm. Sometime later, a group of college girls came through en route to the next shelter followed by about six guys - all from a small liberal arts college near Franklin, Tennessee. The guys, who camped in our shelter, were lively and animated. On hearing reports that they all broke out their pipes for an after-dinner smoke, I regretted not having sat up to chat with this talkative group (not to mention having left my pipe at home...) But, for whatever reason, I was in no mood for socializing, preferring to attempt some shut-eye. Notwithstanding, in spite of the combined comforts of sleeping bag and Therm-a-Rest, my pursuit of sleep went largely unrewarded. Maybe it was the extreme break in routine. Perhaps the high, gusting winds buffeting the gap. Whatever the case, morning came, and those Tennessee guys were up and gone before I was out of my bag.

Youth is wasted on the wrong people, as Ori would say.

Youth is wasted on the young, is Oxy's version...

Daily mileage: 3.6 miles

Day 2 Saturday 13 October

I rose around 7:45. None of us were moving with break-neck speed. We lowered and retrieved our food from the high cables and set about making breakfast. I had brought along - in typical weekender fashion - the absurd luxury of my portable Aerobie coffee press, so I made French press-style coffee (Peet's African Uzuri blend) as an accompaniment to hot cocoa, granola bars, fig newtons, etc., nothing too fancy. We were packed and gone in just over an hour after rising - 8:53 by my watch.

The morning was more of the same from the afternoon before - following a ridge along intermittent single-track of leaf-covered turf or moist, craggy segments to be negotiated with care. Our constant companion was the fog-like conditions of the high elevations with the cloud cover we had driven up into the day before. Once or twice, the clouds would part enough to confirm that - at lower elevations - the sun was brightly shining and we imagined the warmer temperatures we had been enjoying unconsciously before our afternoon climb up Clingman's Dome Road.

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After covering 1.7 miles, we stopped for a short break at **Silers Bald** shelter (elevation 5460 feet). Sometime after 10:00 am, we had descended to an elevation where the cloud cover began to thin or break. About this time, while passing through a level section of trail, we spotted a grouse off to the left. My efforts to retrieve camera and snap a picture were fruitless.

5.5 miles beyond **Silers Bald**, we arrived at **Cold Spring Knob** shelter (elevation 5220 feet) where we took another break. During breaks, we shed packs, peed, snacked, added or removed clothing as needed and fetched/treated water. A testament to the planning of AT shelters is that every shelter has a spring-fed water source within a short walk of the shelter - usually less than a quarter mile and usually downhill. Both Louis B and Chris had water filtering equipment designed for backcountry use. All AT water must be treated. Treatment and purification systems available involve either chemical methods (drops or tablets) or mechanical or filtration methods (gravity, squeeze, pump). We used either or both of **Diode's** and **Oxy's** MSR hand-pumped water treatment system.

We moved on from **Cold Spring Knob** (elevation 5220 feet), arriving at **Derrick Knob** shelter (elevation 4901 feet) around 1:20 pm. Given the terrain, our hiking pace was averaging about 2 mph - hardly brisk. By now, we had lost 1,742 feet of elevation since leaving **Clingman's Dome**. In addition, what the older members of our expedition were remembering about hiking in general - and particularly the AT - was as follows:

- there's a LOT of up and down on the AT. A LOT.
- very little of the AT resembles a well-maintained footpath in your typical park
- uphill-tending trails - though they help you most efficiently to shortness of breath - are safer to transit, since - if you fall - you don't have that far to travel before impact
- on the other hand, downhill-tending trails are hard on your legs, great places for wrenched feet or turned ankles, and are particularly treacherous if you fall, since you have that much farther to travel before impact

At **Derrick Knob**, we had a late lunch, I enjoyed Miso soup, some beef jerky, fig newtons and a PopTart. Shortly thereafter, a south-bound thru-hiker trail-named **Spider Man** stopped in. He shed his pack, rummaged in his gear, fetched and treated water, snacked, repacked and was gone in 10-15 minutes. In the meantime, we questioned him long enough to discover that:

- he was from northeastern PA

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- he had started his journey at Katahdin in early June (4-1/2 months ago)
- he had started the day at Ice Water Spring shelter (21 miles away)
- at Ice Water Spring shelter he had passed the previous night with 22 hikers
- Ice Water Spring shelter has a design capacity of 20 hikers
- he was en route to Spence Field shelter 5-1/2 miles away
- his daily total would be 26-1/2 miles before he would rest

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep*

You learn quickly by observing thru-hikers (**Diode**, **Spider Man**, et al) that they tend to be strictly business. There is little inefficiency in their movements or the way they use their time. One might conclude that their life has - if only temporarily - been condensed down to a very few essential activities and everything else is ruthlessly ignored as extraneous or unnecessary. This is seen quite readily in their selections of gear, food, clothing and quantities of any and everything they decide to pack and haul. But, in other more subtle ways, too varied and numerous to mention, their commitment to economy is not only perceived but real. Just before embarking on our short journey, I read the true account of blind hiker Bill Irwin who with his seeing eye dog Orient (composite trail name **Orient Express**) hiked the entire AT. In his book [Blind Courage](#), Irwin made the following statement in a wonderfully condensed fashion:

It was as if only by hiking could we understand the burden of possessions

Somewhere on the heels of **Spider Man**'s appearance, a large group of college students from the University of Michigan appeared. Equal parts men and women, they showed up late afternoon, complaining of the difficulty of the section they had just completed - concluding with some steep climbs - in order to reach the summit of **Derrick Knob**. Apparently they were part of a larger group, obligated to separate due to high demand for shelter space brought on by spikes in weekend trail traffic near the peak period for Fall foliage. As you will notice, this made the second group of weekend collegians we had encountered on the trail in as many days. Hey, *Fall Break* weekend, right? Go figure.

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Although, initially, most of the group acted pretty sober following their recent climb to the top of the knob, one guy in particular expressing concern about a sore knee, they seemed upbeat and fun-loving. They were, however, quickly catching onto the prudence and desirability of traveling light and, much to our surprise and delight, unloaded two unopened 12-ounce chubs of Johnsonville beef summer sausage on us. They swore us to secrecy re this bestowal of sausage - admitting that they were carrying food for the other members of their large group (who we were to meet later).

Before dusk the second wave of Michigan weekenders arrived. Another mixed group, this one - we presently divined - included the excursion leader/organizer. This seemed evident by the fact that he showed keen and immediate interest in the movements and welfare of the prior group, when they passed through, any additional intel we might have collected during their brief appearance at the shelter. Not to miss the opportunity for pranksterism, I said the group in-question had passed through earlier and that two of them were on stretchers. As only a leader/organizer would, this remark was received with undiluted gravity. I quickly dispelled his concerns (or, at least, attempted to) by saying I was joking, that everyone was fine. However, from then on, he regarded any communications from me with predictable circumspection.

Two south-bound thru-hikers - **Chesty** and **Roadhouse** - arrived later. One tall, one short, both bearded, strictly business. We attempted to break through their trail-induced, hard outer shell and engage them socially. They were from Kentucky. They changed directly into off-trail clothes - **Roadhouse** donning a pair of corduroy bedroom slippers - then made their evening meal and sat on the bench against the stonework of the shelter and ate. I was also impressed by the fact that - finding the shelter as crowded as it was with the three of us, eight or ten collegian weekenders, along with another two hikers - they chose to sleep outside. **Chesty** set up his tent just outside the shelter and **Roadhouse** strung a hammock between two trees. Is it that chivalry lives on - or - thru-hikers are just that efficient and no-nonsense? I leave you to draw your own conclusions.

I was in the sack by 8:00. All night long, the wind on the ridge howled in the high trees, their trunks groaning, their branches clacking and creaking. In spite of these conditions, probably common at this elevation, I slept a good deal better than the

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night before; but **Roadhouse** said the wind blew the rain cover off his hammock. Somehow, he still managed to get some shuteye.

Daily mileage: 7.2 miles

Day 3 Sunday 14 October

Rising around 7:40, we fetched our food bags, made coffee and cocoa, had whatever snacks or what-have-you that we were opting to consider as breakfast, packed and left around 9:40. It was a rocky and hilly start to the day. **Diode** spotted a wild turkey before we began the ascent to the summit of **Thunderhead Mountain** (elevation 5527 feet). For all intents and purposes, the benchmark atop this peak equated to the 2,000 mile mark for **Diode** on his south-bound trek. We stopped for photo opps and **Diode** enjoyed the bag of Skittles sent with **Oxy** by his little sister **Mindy** for the occasion.

We continued for a short stretch on to **Rocky Top** - yes; Rocky Top, Tennessee; that one - (elevation 5540 feet). There, we met another group of three, trail-names: **Wrong Way**, **Pay Day** and **Skinny Bear**. We stopped for another quick photo opp, trading cameras with the other triumvirate to enable at least one shot of our whole group. From **Rocky Top**, it was on to **Spence Field** (elevation 4931 feet) where we planned to stop for lunch, and where - allegedly - there was the extreme backcountry luxury of a privy. This was one of the most magical stretches of trail we were to cover - through high alpine meadows, where wind-blown cloud-mist rushed continuously across the landscape before us in evanescent foggy mist. I took the photos of this section with the sad realization that the motion element, the constantly-evolving cloud forms blown by stiff winds, could never even be implied, let alone captured.

We detoured off the AT for 0.1 mile or so, making **Spence Field** shelter just before 3:00, there reuniting with **Wrong Way**, **Pay Day** and **Skinny Bear**. While we enjoyed our respective lunches, we chatted with them, finding they were from Culowhee, NC - one or more of them holding teaching posts at Western Carolina University. One was also the owner of a popular Tex-Mex restaurant. I must admit, discussing various menu items from said restaurant went a long way toward diminishing the enjoyment of my trail lunch. There was, however, no diminishing the (should I say 'enjoyment' or 'relief') offered by that other **Spence Field** backwoods amenity... We remained for a

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half-hour and left around 3:25 for our final segment of the day, the 2.9 miles lying between **Spence Field** and **Russell Field**.

We covered that nearly three miles in about an hour, arriving at **Russell Field** shelter (elevation 4367 feet) at 4:30. We claimed and set-up our sleeping areas and fetched water from the spring-fed source down off the ridge to the west, and made dinner, taking our time and jointly polishing off the summer sausage inherited from the Michigan weekenders, and the Wheat Thins I had packed. In addition, I had Miso Soup, **Diode** and **Oxy** had rice and salmon. (Dang trail gourmets!)

Sometime about now, a couple showed up - tall guy and woman from the Research Triangle Park area. She was finishing her PhD in Pharmacology at Duke. They were planning to meet a friend and former fellow Pharmacology student at Duke who was on his way to completing a south-bound transit of the entire AT. They expected their friend to arrive later - at a time not specified. Shortly after appearing, the guy went down off the ridge to the spring and returned with the report that, after drawing water, he turned around to discover a bear watching him. At first, I confess to having brushed his report aside as inconsequential. I can't say why - maybe seeing is believing? At any rate, believe I would when the bear made an appearance in plain view of us and 40-50 meters away. The same guy (hey - he had a woman to protect!) walked out yelling and beating a metal cooking pan in a show of the usual bear-discouraging behavior that all backpackers are instructed to employ. If the bear ran off, it wasn't for long. When he reappeared, he watched us from 30-40 meters away with an animal variety of studied indifference and nonchalance that may have qualified him as "cool" - certainly, he hadn't much fear of us - even outnumbered five to one. As we hastened to hang our food, he sauntered off to the base of a tree on a downward sloping part of the ridge and lay down. Like: "No hurry. You boys just take your time. I'm gonna just sit right here and watch the day go by..." Night was falling fast and, returning to the shelter, I lost sight of the bear. I supposed him to have eventually ambled on.

It is hard if not impossible to move through Great Smoky Mountains National Park unaware of bears. Those having familiarity with the region - even cursory familiarity - know that *ursus americanus* - the North American Black Bear - proliferates. The anecdotes are many and varied, to the point of constituting a sort of cliché within the

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region. Even to the uninitiated or uninformed, the shelters themselves have the following sign posted in plain view:

Do not cook or eat in sleeping area. Food odors attract bears.

I will mention several details which I believe are worth recording, before telling you that I was in bed by nightfall - just after 7:00 pm. During our evening meal, some small quantity - an ounce or two - of cocoa was sloshed from a mug onto the end of the wooden bench backing up to the bottom leg of the C-shaped stonemasonry enclosure that is the Russell Field shelter. I had finished my dinner, rinsing out my cup and using it to drink water before setting it down on the bench. Also, in my haste to hang our food before nightfall - under the observation of the bear which I won't necessarily characterize as careful - I omitted to include the zipper bag containing my Aerobie coffee press. Inside that bag, in a zip-lok storage bag was my last sacred reserve of Peet's African Uzuri blend ground coffee - maybe an ounce.

The night was to be a memorable one. There might be any of a number of ways to describe it, but let's try this as my heading of choice for starts:

Why I didn't sleep well on our last night out

All right. Let's get the predictable part out of the way. **Diode** and **Oxy** were bunked on the lower platform and I was on the upper platform just above them. I was lying on my back making good use of my Black Diamond headlamp for the purpose of reading. At around 7:45-8:00 (just after dark) there was a slight rustling sound which could easily have been imagined as **Diode** or **Oxy** rummaging for something near where they were bunked. This theory began breaking up rapidly, however, when we all heard **Diode** shouting, "HEY!!!" followed by **Oxy** yelling "HEY!!!" As I recall, someone shouted "GET OUT OF HERE!!!" By the time I was able to roll over in my bag, the cause of the commotion (clearly ursine) was gone and all that was visible was an empty shelter surrounded by the darkness of night.

Diode - first to spot the bear up-close-and-personal - reports that he was inside the shelter, maybe five feet from where we were all bunked, nosing around the end of the bench where cocoa was spilled, camp cup residue emitted strong and irresistible aromas of unimaginable deliciousness and Peet's African Uzuri blend coffee emanated

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its seductive olfactory magnetism through zip-lok bag and zippered fabric pouch. (Get the feeling that bears have a sense of smell at least as keen as yours and mine?) Apart from the excitement of a close-up bear encounter, the part I wish I had not missed is this: on the bear's face was a clear expression of guilt and acknowledged wrongdoing - the hang-dog look of a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Things calmed down surprisingly fast and snores began filling the airwaves of the shelter. But at 8:45, I was lying prone on my sleeping bag reading when three mice ran past me along the large, deep mortar joint in the rough stonework of the wall next to me. Not much excitement, but hard to overlook. Later, just before midnight, a mouse ran across my head. (I know - you would have been sleeping soundly by now, right?)

At sometime around 1:00 am, our shelter-mates' thru-hiker friend finally made his appearance. They talked quietly and caught him up on details like bear visits and - with his red light headlamp shining around the shelter (and in my face) - I heard him say something about tracks. I assumed this to relate to the bear appearance. He ducked back outside to make his dinner before re-entering the shelter to unroll his sleeping bag and bunk out for the rest of the night.

All night, as nearly every night on the trail, the wind howled along the high ridge we were following, the trees groaning and the oaks raining acorns down on the metal roof of the shelter off-and-on for the entire night. I feel certain that the seasoned thru-hiker learns to sleep through such minor disturbances.

But at 2:30 - all of the foregoing minor nuisances were eclipsed by a fierce storm. As it happens, I had needed to pee for an hour or more, but was reluctant to rise and venture forth - especially with recent bear visitation activities. With the storm's arrival, I decided to go out and seek relief at the expense of being briefly pelted by the early rainfall. My timing was pretty good. That storm only grew in fury, bringing higher winds, lightning in generous supply and thunder. Did I mention that the roof of the shelter at Russell Field was retrofitted with some clear polycarbonate roof panels to admit daylight when the sun was shining. I was lying on my back beneath one of these skylight panels when a blinding flash of lightning flared, followed by a peal of thunder that shook and rumbled our structure for what felt like ten seconds. Though that storm - which lasted about three hours - gratuitously bestowed torrents of rain on us, we remained warm and dry.

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But - along with all the other features of the evening entertainment package - I didn't manage to sleep more than about an hour, at best.

Daily mileage: $9.2 + 0.2 = 9.4$ miles

Day 4 Monday 15 October

I rose with mixed anticipation and dread. It was the last day of hiking and - by day's end - we would shower, enjoy some real food and spend the night in a comfortable bed. On the other hand, we would be making our longest hike of the weekend (almost 14 miles) and losing 2,000 feet of elevation in the process. This suggested some potentially treacherous descent segments, with the usually inescapable consequence of aching quadriceps, not to mention the usual step-by-step misery of toes crowded into the toe-box of hiking shoes - the all-too-familiar formula for success employed by whosoever wants to facilitate toenails turning blue and falling off over 4-6 weeks.

It was 7:20 or so when I peed, washed, and went to fetch down our food from the high cables. **Diode** heated water and we made coffee (our last batch) and cocoa. I ate peanuts and a fig bar. Meanwhile, our RTP shelter-mates are preparing to leave, clearly destined to get out of the gate ahead of us. Their late-arriving, thru-hiker friend (we learned that **Tracks** was his trail-name) - who from all accounts was hardcore and did nothing halfway - dons one of those unusual Cuben fiber (UHMWPE) packs sold by **Hyperlite Mountain Gear**. My guess is that his entire pack weighed in at 20 pounds or less. Bizarre-looking, but - at that weight - certain to make for some *fast* hiking...

We messed around and left at 8:50. Worried by reports of thunderstorms and rain that might have - should have - could have - arrived yesterday or today, by 9:00 we had left the by now familiar cloud cover and were walking in the sunshine. The morning was bright and beautiful and - in spite of the night's heavy rainfall - trail conditions were good - without the mud that might have been expected. After a short hike of just under 3 miles, we arrived at **Mollies Ridge** shelter (elevation 4602 feet) around 10:00. We fetched and treated water, snacked, and left at 10:35 for our lunch stop 5 miles away.

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We made **Birch Spring Gap** campground (elevation 3680 feet) after losing 1000 feet of elevation around 1:00 and dropped packs for a mid-day lunch break. **Diode** heated water and made a last package of instant potatoes for himself and **Oxy** while I enjoyed my last package of Ramen noodles. Leaving **Birch Spring Gap** at 1:45, we continued along an ascending trail to **Shuckstack Mountain** (elevation 3800 feet) arriving around 2:10. For an additional 0.1 mile worth of climbing, the almost 80-year-old firetower on top of the summit beckoned. **Diode** and I ventured there and climbed the rickety tower to splendid views - the absolute best of our entire journey. **Diode** and I descended the spur trail from the Shuckstack summit and around 2:30 began our final descent to the AT trail-head a mile from **Fontana Dam**. Along the way, a day hiker alleged he had encountered a bear about a mile up from the trail-head. I never saw it, but **Oxy** did - spying the bear down off the trail to one side foraging in the undergrowth. We also overtook **Tracks** and his RTP friends who, as the day wore on, seemed less and less inclined to attempt to maintain his hardcore thru-hiker pace...

Diode was off the trail around 3:35, followed by **Ori** and **Oxy** in succession. We covered the remaining mile across the top of **Fontana Dam** to the Visitors Center (elevation 1700 feet), which - having clocked it Friday - we knew to be one very level and mostly-paved mile.

Cultural reentry went smoothly enough. Loading our packs into my car, we drove up the hill from the lake and checked in at the Lodge at Fontana Village around 5:00 pm. Louis A headed for the shower while Louis B and Chris headed down to the Fontana Village Country Store to resupply for **Diode's** next segment (Fontana to NOC). I soon scouted out where to find a cold beer and cool my heels. We reconvened later for joint dinner - beer, burgers, side salads and - happy to not be hiking - retired for the night.

Daily mileage: $13.5 + 0.2 = 13.7$ miles

Weekend Total: $3.6 + 7.2 + 9.4 + 13.7 = 33.9$ miles

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Walking in the Clouds

Beyond sunshine
And traffic, beyond
Tourist chatter, dying away
With asphalt, glass, neon

The wind rises
Companion of clouds
Walking, feet made
To accept somehow

This new terrain where
Cloud condensate clings
Then falls in droplets
From foliage gatherings

Torn loose by wind.
Footfalls near silent
In crescendo of wind, all
Wildness and barren

Audibility of crunch-
Ing footfalls more
Felt as vibration
In the torso borne

Than sonic competitors
Of wind-blast rhythm
Wind's persistent and
Furious paroxysm

We would make
The shelter by nightfall
An end of pack-burden

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Tired cadence of footfall

A quick search for
The coved shelter's lee
Where's water, and where
To hang food between trees

But borne away
By wind's howling corpus
On the arching back
Of each raging gust

Breath of blue slate, quartzite
Maple, deciduous
Poplar bark, oak-rot
And highland humus

Black bear, skunk
And stepping grouse
Wild turkey, junco,
Chipmunk, mouse

To the place prepared
For pointlessness, all care
Is carried by wind-rush:
Elsewhere.

The Aftermath of such things as this is probably not surprising. Our hike, in total, was only 34 miles spread out over 3-1/2 days. By AT standards - easy - *a walk in the woods* - (so to speak). But, I had just come off my first cycling century six days prior and had had no real time to prepare for the unusual exertions of backpacking on trails of the AT sort. Thirty years ago, I probably would never have given it a moment's thought. But now, approaching 60 years of age, this loomed as something of an unknown that made me uneasy. There is much publicity about the rodent problem in

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AT shelters - hardly comforting when one has no reality-based index as to the exact nature of the problem. Some people's imaginations are more productive than others when it comes to conflating thoughts on such topics; and, not necessarily in a *good* way. What about bears? My thoughts about entering as an outsider a domain that was distinctly theirs as much as distinctly *not* mine tended toward sobriety - if not out the other side into near-hysteria. Also, the potential - increasingly as Fall wore on - for sudden changes in the weather - falling air temps, pouring rain, snow, or anything else I failed to mention - gave rise to real fears about the possibility of hypothermia - in a remote area with patchy cell phone coverage (if any).

Diode had conceived of a sensible plan for accommodating the neo-elderly during our brief venture onto the trail. We would ramp-up mileage from day-to-day. Even better, the longer we hiked, the more of our food we would consume, which - in-turn - would lighten our load. So the heavy pack segments were short hikes while the longer hikes were eased by the fact of being made with light packs (gives a whole new meaning to the term *front-loaded...*) In the final analysis, the trip was wonderful weather-wise, animal contact-wise, and in just about every other-wise. And, as I mentioned, we eventually did walk out of the cloud mantle. That last long hike was one of the most enjoyable, proving well within our abilities - even at the ripe age of the **Ori/Oxy-Lou Club**. As of this writing, I even seem to have kept all my toenails; well, most of them. Like the title of Will's play:

All's well that ends well

Perhaps better still is Thomas Jefferson's quote etched in a quartzite stone above the east fireplace at Asheville's **Grove Park Inn**:

How much pain have cost us the evils that have never happened.

SUMMARY

Start	Clingman's Dome	6643	NC / TN	
Day 1	Double Spring Gap	5511	Swain, NC	3.6
Day 2	Derrick Knob	4880	Sevier, TN	7.2
Day 3	Spence Field	4915	Swain, NC	9.2 + 0.2 = 9.4
Day 4	Russell Field	4360	Blount, TN	13.5 + 0.2 = 13.7
End	Fontana Dam	1775	Graham, NC	TOTAL 33.9