

THE FINGER LAKES TRAIL

Chapter 1

Biographical Prologue to the Idea
(Series on the early years by Wallace D. Wood)

It was August of 1961 and the bus was on its Sunday night run from Boston to Rochester. Suddenly there welled up from my sub-conscious the thought: "Why not a hiking trail across New York State, south of the Finger Lakes?"

Some fifty years earlier I first saw the light of day in a farmhouse three miles north of Owego, N.Y. What sequence of experiences over that half century might have rooted together and suddenly, as the bus sped along, sprouted an "idea tree"? The idea was so exciting and seemingly feasible that in the remaining hours of the all night ride, mental plans were made and next steps formulated.

My youth was a happy period with parents warm in their relationships, rarely stern with their three children - I, the youngest. Their weekly life consisted of 6½ days of hard work - a little more leisurely on Sunday which regularly included the Methodist church in Flemingville and later the one in Owego (where once leaving the altar with the other ushers, I dropped the plate on the hardwood floor) followed by home with chicken dinner and ice cream from the hand turned six quart freezer.

My first ten years were on my dad's own sixty acre farm which straddled the road to Flemingville. To the west were crop fields, a railroad, cow pasture, and skunk cabbage by a frog pond next to the Owego creek. To the east of the road were the barns, a water trough-pump filled by a windmill, and more pasture as the land sloped up to the woods through a hickory nut grove to a ravine lined with hemlock - a small one each year cut for Christmas.

In the spring there were the columbines with the sweet spur nibs to taste the nectar between tongue and teeth. Barefooted summers, I drove the cattle to and from the west pasture, gingerly stepping around the cow pies. Better yet the butter cups to hold under a neighbor girl's chin to see if she liked butter. In the fall there were hazel nuts along the cow lane and butternut trees by the creek.

The first five school years were in a country one room schoolhouse. We were let out one morning about 1917 and saw our first airplane fly over. I remember one of the local scandals which caused a change of teachers after the first four years. Seems this teacher and spouse, childless, went around with another childless couple - and wham!, they swapped husbands - I suspect with a short divorce interlude. So in my fifth school year there was another teacher and that year was a harbinger of change for both my family and me. The teacher tried hard but was sensitive and nervous and couldn't cope with the boys all of whom made up a gang led by an older hell raiser. In spring afternoons we often skipped school, to go for a swim by the bridge, or hunt Indian arrowheads over a newly ploughed field, perch in a tree in front of the school and refuse to come down, or put a hay rake on the schoolhouse roof at Halloween. And so I failed fifth grade.

That next summer dad became manager of the County Farm and Almshouse, just south of his farm, where I lived the next eight years. There was a cook, a house maid, and several hired hands. Also I was presented with a bicycle and informed that I would be going to the Owego village school henceforth.

And so I pumped the three miles each way from 5th thru 12th grade. I picked up the cornet and once played in the school band at the Elks Club when Franklin Delano Roosevelt came thru stumping for Governor of New York.

Along with courses in latin, history, English, physics, and biology, there were church parties, school dances, dates, pool shooting, and basketball. My teacher for bookkeeping was Miss Emily Thompson, several times a benefactor and Life member of FLTC. At home I trapped skunks, muskrats, milked cows, was given a rifle at 16 and taught to drive the Model T Ford.

Then came the Rochester and Cornell years. Electrical engineering at RIT, where in my senior year I met Betty on a blind date, meant to occur at a church but she refused the invitation of her sister's boy friend, so they came to get me at the YMCA after church. Come September she went off to Cattaraugus, N Y. to teach French and English, and I went to U. of R. night school, and with my physics professor started the then Rochester Astronomy Club. I worked a year at Iola Sanatorium as plumber and electrician's helper, and then two years at Cornell majoring in physics and minoring in astronomy. A course at Cornell under professor Von Engeln, on physical geography, contributed a root to the later trail idea.

In Rochester, with Taylor Instrument, marriage, and children, I settled down to home life and a vocation. I was excused from World War II due to age and my technical job. I became scoutmaster for the first time and loved the outdoor courses, hiking and camping, and learning that sassafras trees had leaves of three shapes. Then later when Darrow (the name came from having read about Clarence Darrow) came of Scouting age I was first scoutmaster at a new church in Brighton. Scouting brought me back to some of the outdoor adventures of my youth.

When about 40 I decided it was time for some new adventures. I took three steps: bought a canoe, joined the Genesee Valley Hiking Club, and started collecting forest property. My first canoe trip, with Darrow as my partner, was with the GVHC from Rush along Honeoye creek to the Genesee River. I feel greatly indebted to the GVHC.

After building my house here, the family went on summer trips to Canada, west to Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain National Park, and east to Bar Harbor.

There were two outstanding hikes - the first with GVHC, led by Landis Smith, 27 miles around Hemlock Lake, where I first met Korby Wade and Frances Jacobi. And then on a western trip, I left the family for a day, and with a hiking banker from California, we did Long's Peak in Colorado, about 14,155 ft. We started out at 9000 ft., went up to the summit by the cable route and back around down thru the keyhole route.

In the summer of 1961, several things made it possible for my week of solo hiking the White Mountain AMC Hut System, which preceded the bus ride at the beginning of this chapter.

(In the next issue - the week of adventure and personalities met in the White Mountains).

In the summer of 1961 a fringe benefit in the form of a fourth week of vacation was granted by Taylor Instrument. Betty went to summer school, and both Darrow and Darcy had summer jobs. What to do with one of those weeks of summer was strongly lurking in my mind.

Two years previously, at a trade association committee meeting in New York City, I met Bob Temple, of the Foxboro Co. of Mass. His job previous to his current one was Assistant Hut Manager of the Appalachian Mountain Club White Mountain Hut System. Each hut was a day's hike apart where one could get supper, lodging, breakfast, and a trail lunch.

So I wrote the AMC and made plans for a week of solo hiking with Pinkham Notch Camp as my base, where I could lay out and discuss my mountain route with Bruce Sloat, Assistant Hut Manager at that time.

I hitched a ride to the camp with a friend and on Saturday made a practice hike over Wildcat Mt. It was a clear day, and Mt. Washington peaked against a clear sunny sky to the West. All you could eat, family style, was the rule at the base camp, and also later at the huts.

Sunday morning I climbed on the hut food supply delivery truck, which took food to the hut depots where hut boys by the shortest route available backpacked the supplies to each hut. The truck dropped me off near the west end of the Hut System. From there I hiked up the mountain to Old Lonesome Lake Hut.

It was quiet at mid-afternoon at the hut, and for a sign of life I peeked into the bunkhouse. An old man with his mouth open was snoring away - how could such a man be interesting?

Some 20 souls gathered for supper around the table in the kitchen, the floor of which sloped at least four inches from one corner to the other. Most of us started that meal as strangers. (Years before it had occurred to me that gatherings comprised an excellent opportunity to be a student and observer of a new group as well as a feeling participant. I had also learned that first impressions are often way off the track.) I followed my usual practice - inquiring as to the name, home area, and vocation of each person - with the information often serving as a springboard to conversation about a mutual acquaintance or experience. Then the mouth open sleeper confessed that he was traffic engineer for Worcester, Mass. and asked about me saying that it was my turn, having done the rounds of
The others.

Next morning, the traffic engineer and his nephew hiked down the mountain with me; we parted in the Notch. I proceeded alone up to the Franconia Ridge Trail and went along the Appalachian Trail over Mt. Lincoln, Mt. Lafayette, and down to Greenleaf Hut. The guest list was small and included a few men planning to do the last of their forty-six the next day - a bushwhack to one of the most difficult mountains (46 over 4000 ft. listed) to the east. The roast turkey supper was great as also the breakfast including french toast with a poached egg in a hole cut therein - an example of the excellent cooking of the hut cooks thruout the system.

Tuesday morning brought a heavy steady rain, blasting the hopes of the 46 aspirants -

Pretty hard to do a compass route and bushwack a strange mt. But my route was well marked with white AT paint blazes, over Mt Garfield to Galehead Hut - which I reached about 3 PM. It was a most interesting day, meeting several spruce hens, and enjoying in particular at least a full acre of Indian pipes, their heads silent in the grey and green mist of the forest floor.

At supper I met the Novotney's. The young man from Czechoslovakia and his young bride from England had met at college in Canada and were spending the first of their two weeks of vacation at their favorite hobby - hiking.

The next day was also one of steady rain, and I caught up with the Novotney's going up South Twin Mountain. We were thence companions for the day. At Zealand Hut, mid-afternoon, the walls were full, hung with drying clothes. People sat around in small groups, but soon conversations started and acquaintances found. In small groups, at supper when shoulder to shoulder, there are no snobs. After all, we could laugh at our soaked clothes now that we were dry, around good food, and it was fun drying dishes and helping the hut boys clean up and set the breakfast table.

After a long hike the next day, including a climb over the long rise to Mt. Washington, I arrived at the Lake of the Clouds Hut. Over 100 people were there because it could be easily reached, taking a car to Mt. Washington and dropping down only about a mile to the hut. Along with mass production eating was the relative loneliness of being in a large group.

The next day spelled better hiking though foggy and misty, as I went over Mt. Washington. The trail to the north went under the trestle, over which whizzed the cog train with its load of sitter people to get a hundred foot view from the mountain. The trail that day all above tree line was guided by yellow painted stones atop cairns, the next one just about visible. As I went over Mt. Jefferson and around Mt. Adams, I passed two elderly men and a middle aged lady, all of us headed for Madison Hut.

I met them later at Madison Hut, learning the two men were retired, one having been a letter carrier, and the other a minister from Penns woods. The latter was most interesting; he gave nature talks and led nature walks at a youth camp as a retirement activity.

The next day I returned to Pinkham Notch. About 300 yds. before the hut, I passed a troding family, each with a backpack, each slender and gaunt. He was head of medical at Princeton. (Could it be that doctors think hiking a good activity?)

Next morning I took a bus to Boston and then to Rochester. Somewhere across Massachusetts this recent hiking experience, perhaps coupled with my recent reading about the Appalachian Trail and a book on the geology of the Finger Lakes, generated the idea of a hiking trail across southern New York State.

On August 28, 1961 I wrote a thanks letter to the AMC and to Bruce Sloat, which contained the following paragraph: "During return, I conceived, probably not originally, the idea of a cross New York State hiking trail that would touch the regions of the southern edges of the Finger Lakes. These areas have terrific geological interest, provide the greater elevations outside the Adirondack region, and there are many spots of great historical interest such as portions of the Sullivan Expedition. The thought occurred that it might be possible for various hiking and outing clubs of central New York to participate in such a project."

(In the next issue - a proposal before the Genesee Valley Hiking Club on Sept. 21 and the Initial Organization Meeting at Boy Scout Headquarters on Nov. 18, 1961.)

CHAPTER 3

EVENTS IN THE FALL OF 1961

While at Cornell and living in the basement of the Observatory in my senior year, I took a course in physical geography with Professor von Engeln, who later wrote: "The Finger Lakes Region: It's Origin and Nature," published by Cornell University Press in 1961. It was natural that in late August, after reading his book and the White Mountain Hut sojourn, I wrote him for his reaction to a trail across the southern tier and between the Finger Lakes. Dr. von Engeln's handwritten reply on Sept. 7 follows: "Dear Mr. Wood: I much appreciate your kind words about The Finger Lakes Region and remembrance of your class experience.

About your Finger Lakes Trail project. I think this is an interesting idea although wonder if the region is 'wild' enough to attract hikers as would an Appalachian Trail. Better suited to automobile tours.

As to personal participation - I am beyond the age where I care to undertake any active participation in such a promotion.

However I suggest two people near you whom you might interview and who are definitely interested in the area and the kind of promotion you have in mind: Mr. F.W. Kinsman, P.E. Consulting Eng, Fairport, and Dr. Victor Schmidt, Science Dept. Brockport State Teacher's College. Mr. Kinsman has a theory, original with him, on the origin of the Finger Lakes. Dr. Schmidt is intimately familiar with the glacial geology and concerned with earth science for young and popular instruction.

Try them out for help and participation.

Very Truly Yours - O. D. von Engeln"

To get further reaction to a trail across New York the idea was sent to AMC and ATC and to many individuals. There was a very pleasant lunch with Dr. Babett Brown Coleman, U. of R. Professor of Botany. Encouragement was received all around.

The first key event occurred at the annual meeting of the Genesee Valley Hiking Club at the Rochester Museum of Science on Sept. 21st. The secretary's entry relative to the trail proposal follows:

"Wally Wood spoke on his dream for the future, a Finger Lakes Trailway. This, of course, would be a tremendous undertaking, as permission would have to be secured from property owners, whose land the trail would cross. Wally said, as a start, he would like to see a 25 mile stretch opened along the southern edge of the Finger Lakes. He said there was a possibility of a National Park in the Finger Lakes area. Henry Staehle moved that the GVHC go on record as being sympathetic toward the establishment of such a trail. Fred Wechsler seconded and it carried unanimously. Fred Wechsler, Rosa Wolfer, Helen McBride, and Ed Willis volunteered to help.

- Secretary, Gertrude Sandvik"

A few days later as the word got around, several GVHC members not present at the meeting called and volunteered their help. I remember two stalwart and still very dedicated workers: Korby Wade and Mary Gunn.

Plans were then set for a fall meeting in Rochester to further explore interest and feasibility and for a statewide meeting early in 1962 at Keuka College, where my friend Bill Litterick was then president. In a letter to Bill, I suggested the possibility of 30 to 50 people. But attendance was beyond all expectations as you will see in the March 1975 issue of the NEWS.

The trail idea soon got around to the hiking clubs in the state. David Heck, President of TCHC, in his letter of 9 Oct. to TCHC hikers, spread the word, and invited attendance at a meeting in the home of Paula Strain near Owego, where participation by TCHC would be discussed.

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A historic letter came from Paula Strain on the 16th. She had chatted with Jean Doren and stated that "As a one-woman proponent of trails, I've talked trail until the Triple Cities Hiking Club is a bit bored with me, but I've been enough a stranger not to feel justified in saying we ought to sponsor a trail here or here." Paula was then a seven year veteran with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club and had led that club on a trip to the Jotunheimen of Norway in 1959. Paula plumped herself squarely on the FLTC bandwagon and played a major promotional role for several years - the roles including second president of FLTC. Does any reader of this epistle know of any librarian on the east coast more knowledgeable and a more dedicated trail enthusiast than Paula?

A meeting was held at the writer's home on Oct. 25 to plan a general meeting at the Scout Office in November. For the November meeting several GVHC members agreed to assist: Fred Wechsler, Leon Christiansen, Frances Jacobi, Korby Wade, Helen McBride, Rosa Wolfer, and Ed Willis. The group was called the Finger Lakes Trail Committee and would also assist in planning a statewide meeting early the following year.

In the interest of a common policy relative to the trail crossing state owned lands, the Conservation Department in Albany was approached, resulting in an invitation to visit them. A visit was subsequently made to Albany in which the writer was accompanied by Fred Mohn. Our host was Mr. Victor Glider, then in charge of the recreation program. (This post is now held by a most cooperative Randy Kerr.)

Plans were now steaming ahead. Letters from Paula indicated a wide range of resources for the planning of both trail and related organization. A very encouraging letter came from Olga Rosche of South Wales. She with husband Art, members of the newly formed Foothills Trail Club, and particularly Mabel James had just started to build a western New York, north-south trail, called the Conservation Trail.

The Boy Scout Office, via its Director, Fred Wellington, donated space for a meeting on Saturday afternoon, November 18th. Fred Wechsler and the writer were co-leaders of the meeting. Our principal guest and speaker was Mr. Art Koeber, of Pittsfield Mass. Art's background included hikes on the Long Trail of Vermont over 25 years, member executive committee of the New England Trail Conference since 1956, and member of the Appalachian Trail Conference Board of Managers since 1957. Our second speaker was Mr. Charles Kresge, District Forester from Bath, N.Y. Slides of the AT and the Long Trail by Art and of New York State forests by Mr. Kresge merged visually into excellent potential trail areas in New York State. Some forty people took semi-official action in endorsing the trail and in encouraging a statewide meeting, to be held at Keuka College the last weekend in March.

An article in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle the following morning produced a very pleasant result in a letter from Mona Rynearson of Newark, N.Y. Her Senior Girl Scout Troop specialized in a Trail Blazers' program. They needed a trail to blaze, and we needed local leadership and workers to locate, obtain permissions, and build trail. The Seven Lakes Girl Scout Council and several other Girl Scout Troops have and do play a continuing role in trail programs.

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