

Founding the American Hiking Society

In 1974 I got to know Bill Kemsley, founder of *Backpacker* magazine, while doing an article on the Florida Trail for his publication. The story ran in the fall 1975 issue, and later I invited him to be the featured speaker at our Florida Trail Association annual meeting in 1976.

During lots of correspondence in the next few years, Bill pointed out that the hiking community was poorly represented in Washington, D.C., where U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Park Service budgets are put together. He dreamt of a national hiking organization to represent that constituency.

At the same time, Congress wanted to review the National Trail Systems Act of 1968, designed to protect the Appalachian Trail and create a nationwide system of hiking trails. So it scheduled hearings on how to implement that legislation. As editor and publisher of *Backpacker*, Bill Kemsley knew all about this. So did Paul Pritchard, then president of the Appalachian Trail Conference, a loosely knit organization of individuals, groups and clubs that maintained and enjoyed this popular north-south trail. Acquisition of rights-of-way for the Appalachian Trail had stalled, and the conference was pressuring Congress to make things happen. Congress wanted to find out why it wasn't happening.

Bill and Paul were having a hard time getting other conservation organizations to testify at the March 1976 hearings. The Sierra Club and the Audubon Society were more interested in whales and oil spills. Bill asked me to attend the hearings because it was a great opportunity to promote foot trails to a national audience. Hiking clubs were then quite provincial, and the Florida Trail Association was no exception. So I added my voice to those objecting to the slow work of the Park Service in acquiring rights-of-way and, if necessary, using eminent domain to do it.

The hearings were the first time Bill, Paul and I had gotten together to talk seriously about a national trail organization. There was obviously a need for someone to launch a national hiking club, and we decided to be the ones.

American Hiking Society – by Bill Kemsley Jr.

As Bill Kemsley recalled: *While we agreed on the need for a national hiking lobby while we were in the corridors of the U.S. Senate, we were all leery of spending more time in offices and corridors. Being lovers of the outdoors, we naturally spent our time talking about such an organization out on trails together.*

I had Backpacker magazine available to promote a new organization, and Paul Pritchard knew the key players who would be important to us in Washington and around the country. He could pull a board together better than anyone in the hiking community. But Jim Kern had built the Florida Trail Association from the very beginning, which put the Florida Trail on the ground. To my mind, no one could better serve as our formative president.

I spent a lot of time thinking about how I would approach him. Finally, on a hike he and I took in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with two of our sons, I chose an opportune moment. We were seated in a meadow after eating our trail lunch atop Mount Washington, enjoying magnificent views amidst the splendor of warm, sunny alpine air, when I popped the question.

“Jim, would you consider becoming president of our new organization?” I’m pretty direct. And I was prepared to follow up with persuasive arguments. I was both stunned and pleased that without hesitation, he said, “I’d be honored.”

He was obviously the right man for the job and was very effective. Furthermore, just as important to me and the spirit of the organization, he kept our organizational meetings in the outdoors and on the trails from then on.

Our first step was to schedule a brainstorming session. We agreed it should be in a natural setting, a place without distractions and midway between Miami where I was living and the New York-Washington area. Because it would be in the middle of the summer, I suggested the mountains of western North Carolina and made arrangements at a facility I knew in Brevard. In three days of intensive discussions, this is what we came up with:

Paul, with Bill approving, selected board members. They included Goodloe Byron, U.S. Congressman from Maryland; Louise Marshall, publisher of a hiking newspaper on the West Coast; Boyd Evison, superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park; Dave Ritchie, Supervisor of Acquisitions for the National Park Service's Appalachian Trail and Tom Deans, president of the Appalachian Mountain Club in New England. Others were added later.

We had given birth to the idea of a national hiking organization, but our "baby" was nameless. So Bill ran a contest for the best name, in his *Backpacker* magazine, with a sleeping bag as the prize. Newly named, the American Hiking Society (AHS) had its first board meeting open to the public in Chuck Sloan's law office in the fall of 1976. One tall, lanky guy who showed up at our first meeting introduced himself as Glenn Seaborg. Was he *the* Glenn Seaborg, Nobel laureate in chemistry and former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission? Yes, he was! Glenn became very active in the American Hiking Society for a decade, served on its board and laid out, with his wife Helen, a hiking route through California for our 1980 hike across America. The Glenn T. Seaborg Award is now given annually to recognize "prominent citizens and public officials who

have been effective national advocates for the development and improvement of hiking trails.” I was honored to receive this award in 2003.

Soon after the launch of the American Hiking Society, the only two other national hiking organizations asked to merge with the AHS. The National Hiking and Ski Touring Association came first, and its president, Bill Ruskin, served on our board. He had started a wonderful project, Volunteer Vacations (run by Kay Beebe at her breakfast table in Massachusetts), that put volunteers to work building trails and other projects on public lands. We greatly expanded the program, and Kay served on our board for years. The International Backpackers Association (IBA), run by Lance Field, merged with us later.

Our board realized we needed to do things that brought us national recognition. So the first public forum we created was a hikers’ tax conference. There had been talk about taxing outdoor equipment to fund research into non-game wildlife. But if anyone was going to tax a backpack, we wanted the funds to go to trail maintenance. The conference in the nation’s capital was run by Ron Strickland. Participants included The Wilderness Society, Audubon Society and Sierra Club. Our fledgling American Hiking Society was the only group interested enough to organize such an event.

Soon after, board members decided to have an annual meeting like those of the Florida Trail Association. We first met at Virginia’s Prince William Forest Park and had seminars, an auction of outdoor equipment, an evening program and election of officers and new board members.

The HikaNation Story

Our second board meeting was in Washington, D.C., where we discussed how our new hiking organization could make a publicity splash. Bill Kemsley, always full of ideas, suggested a hike across America. Everyone liked it. We’d start in California and end up on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., with a welcome by President Reagan.

I have always loved big ideas, so I volunteered to coordinate the hike. Nancy Miller, my longtime assistant in the real estate business, became my indispensable helper. As I look back on the project 30 years later, I am amazed that we pulled it off, and doing it part-time, too, because we still had a real estate office to run and a wildlife photography business. Fortunately, many volunteers across the country caught the excitement of a walk across America and pitched in to help. Many along the way joined the hike.

Because so many wanted to participate, we started a newsletter to keep everyone informed on our progress. We had no budget, so we charged \$3 for a year's subscription to cover postage and paper.

We also had a hotline phone number so people could call for information and the location of the hikers along the way. By the time the hike began, we had 1,000 names on our mailing list. Thanks to another contest in *Backpacker* magazine, the hike got a catchy name: HikaNation. I also searched for corporate sponsors, but after dozens of letters and calls, I came up empty-handed.

Laying out the route of the hike was a crucial part of the planning. I assumed in the beginning that hikers would start from Los Angeles because more Californians lived in that area and because the hikers could enter federal land faster. But then I got an offer from Glenn Seaborg that I couldn't refuse: "If you start the hike in San Francisco, I will organize the route in California." He lived in Berkeley and felt confident that he could get hikers to the Nevada border on a route they would enjoy. I quickly accepted his offer.

If you asked me what was the most important element in an effort like this, I would say, "Get the word out, and then read your mail." You can depend on the unexpected to happen, but you can't predict what the unexpected will bring. It will bring great ideas and it will bring crazy ideas. How to tell the difference can make or break your project.

One couple wanted to bring their baby; one hiker wanted to bring his dog. Another wanted to bring a llama. What do you say to each?

One letter was from Monty Montgomery of Macomb, Illinois. Monty was retired from the Air Force (good), a hiker with time on his hands (very good) and he owned an Airstream trailer (very, very good!). He offered to follow the hikers, bring them mail and supplies, drive ahead and find camping spots for them, bring new hikers from the local bus station and take hikers off the trail as needed. Monty was a miracle I had not yet prayed for!

There were many other volunteers, of course. We wanted a departure celebration somewhere in San Francisco and needed a chairman for that event as well as for our arrival celebration in Washington, D.C.

Just working out departure details was a major challenge. Glenn and I agreed that Golden Gate Park was the ideal starting spot before crossing the Oakland Bay Bridge and heading east. The problem was that the Oakland Bay Bridge had no sidewalks.

Thanks to Glenn Seaborg's skillful pulling of strings, the California State Assembly passed an act allowing two lanes on the bridge's upper level to be closed from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, April 13, 1980. It was the first time any group had ever been allowed to walk across the Oakland Bay Bridge since it was built in 1936.

Our lucky streak continued when Mike McReynolds, who lived in downtown San Francisco, agreed to be our departure celebration chairman.

Now all we desperately needed was money! I had gotten nowhere despite letters to camera manufacturers, soft drink and energy food companies, plus every large company in the outdoor industry. Then General Foods called to say perhaps Postum might be

interested. Postum? It's a coffee substitute, and we were going through Utah ... Mormon country. (Mormons eschew coffee.) Serendipity again. They were great sponsors and contributed \$9,000 to the hike, plus lots of goodies including T-shirts and other swag. In return, we gave them good publicity. But we needed a lot more money.

About this time the California State government said there was a hitch in our agreement to use the bridge. We needed a \$2 million liability policy! Where was I going to get that? And what would the premium be, even if I could find a company to sell us a policy? At the time we had no budget! I had been flying by the seat of my Miami pants for weeks before the hike, when a broker in Minneapolis called to say he had a policy for \$2,000. I grabbed it!

Lady Luck had yet to desert us. I had made a plea for financial help to the Dunspaugh Dalton Foundation in Miami. One of the trustees, Bill Lane, agreed to see me. He wanted to be a part of our project. A socialite and urbanite, heavysset and gray-haired, he didn't look the hiker type. But he had special ties to San Francisco. Even better, he said he would contribute \$10,000. At once, our essential out-of-pocket expenses were covered.

Our departure celebration chairman, Mike Reynolds, was busy doing press interviews, printing and distributing flyers and organizing volunteers. He also had to find a central location for the 100 or so walkers to meet each other and be welcomed the night before the hike. Mike finally secured the basement of a downtown Methodist church.

On the night before the hike, I welcomed everyone, made introductions and laid out the route and plan. There were lots of details to convey and lots of questions.

Glenn had sent over a medical team from the University of California, Berkeley to give quick physicals to all the hikers. The medics wanted to document any differences in

before-and-after physical conditions. I watched one older man doing jumping jacks, and thought, *Please don't have a heart attack, mister, right here in the basement of the Methodist church.* Another senior citizen, John Stout, was 68. He would be 69 when he finished the hike. There were 18 hikers at the end who were identified as long-distance hikers by walking at least 1,500 miles of the 4,400-mile route. John was one of them. In fact, he had walked every mile except for two miles across the Mississippi River. Since no one could walk on water, everyone, including John, had to ride the ferry across.

One other incident that evening sticks in my mind. At the end of the meeting, a little lady came up and wondered if I could arrange to get her back to her hotel room. It was dark and Marce Guerrein was from the East. She looked delicate and soft. I thought, *This hiker can't get to her hotel, but she intends to carry a pack across America?* As it turned out, Marce was also one of those long-distance hikers!

As the fog lifted the next morning, the hikers assembled. Astronaut Randy Schweickert welcomed the group, as did Glenn and I. Scottish bagpipers played. And the hikers followed the pipers down to the Pacific Ocean where they could wet their boots in the surf.

At six the next morning, Glenn Seaborg was ready to lead us across the bridge. The sky was miraculously cloudless, and every hiker in the Bay Area seemingly turned out so they could say they were the first to walk across the Oakland Bay Bridge. Just at sunrise, hiking hordes rushed past me as a Postum executive handed me a check for \$9,000. Not a moment too early! The next morning a huge color photograph of hikers on the bridge was on the front page of every paper in the Bay Area. The newspapers estimated the crowd at 5,000 to 7,000. It was a great day for the American Hiking Society.