

Classic case of



wanderlust

Backpacking partners tackle an epic hike.

Essay by Eric Lupfer

In March 2007, The Missouri Review enters its 30th year of publication. In celebrating the Review's journey from brand-new literary magazine to lauded literary staple, and in the spirit of MIZZOU magazine's Road Trip issue, we include here excerpts from author Eric Lupfer's essay "Thru-Hiking," from The Best of The Missouri Review Travel 2006 anthology.

Lupfer's essay details a classic experience: a backpacking trip spurred by post-collegiate wanderlust. Kerry is the name of Lupfer's friend and hiking partner. "Yankee Buckeye" and other such names refer to the individual monikers that hikers on the Appalachian Trail give themselves as a tradition. Ward Leonard, a character mentioned, is a trail legend. Excerpts come from various parts of the essay; to read the piece in its entirety, see information about ordering the travel anthology at missourireview.com.

To thru-hike is to hike the entire Appalachian Trail in one continuous journey. The Trail is approximately 2,150 miles long, so a thru-hike generally takes five months and can be done in either direction — Georgia to Maine or vice versa. To walk north is to go with weather and tradition. You start in Georgia in March or April, move with spring up the country, finish in Maine in the fall. Put plainly, it's easier that way, if such a trip can be described as "easy." You have at least seven months to complete the hike and, perhaps more importantly, you have plenty of company. The Appalachian

Trail Conference estimates that 95 percent of the hikers who have completed the Trail walked from south to north.

To walk south, on the other hand, is to go alone. You face more obstacles: Maine's early summer black flies and swarming mosquitoes; the mid-Atlantic August heat; the threat of early snow in the Smokies; and, as you cross northbounders one by one along the Trail, always the vague sense of going the wrong direction. But south is the only choice if, like Kerry and me, you begin after the first of May. Winter arrives early in the New England mountains. We left Mount Katahdin, the Trail's northern terminus, on the first of July, hoping to make Georgia by Thanksgiving.

We were on the Trail for three weeks before meeting the Yankee Buckeye. From Katahdin, we walked 281 miles southwest to the New Hampshire line, tracing through a country of isolated lakes, boreal forest, and slate and granite ridges. We met few others. The first big packs of northbounders would not cross into Maine until late July; the mosquitoes and black flies discouraged most everyone else. The few front-running northbounders we did meet — Sassafras Tea, Respirator, Phantom and Energizer — only stopped for a few moments to exchange introductions, so Kerry and I often had the sense, rare in the East, that we were alone in the woods.

We walked with a self-conscious

seriousness of intent, breaking camp at dawn, moving quickly down the Trail, rationing our free time as if hiking were an obligation. In fact, it felt like an obligation. We had both wanted to hike the Trail for years. At 10, I took my family's road atlas and, on the map of each Eastern state, traced over the Trail's wandering line of dashes with a black Magic Marker. Some years later, I walked sections of the Trail in Tennessee and Virginia with my parents, in North Carolina with groups from my summer camp, and in Maine and New Hampshire with groups from college (which often included Kerry). With a dreamy alacrity, I looked forward to hiking the entire length of the A.T. Never mind that the Trail was officially marked and that it laced through the most populated part of the country. To hike the entire Appalachian Trail would be, somehow, to explore. I could picture myself walking some high ridge in the late afternoon light — full pack, strong legs, a pioneer and pilgrim at once, with newfound access to ... something. I am certain that Kerry had a similar vision, yet neither one of us could name his motivation more precisely, not even during those first weeks in Maine. We were both 24 and had left good jobs to make this trip, which had to do with going into the wilderness for adventure and returning transformed, with being young and unsure of our futures. We knew only that this thru-hike was important and that it needed to be made with fastidious care.

A minority of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers are Southbounders, traveling from Maine's Mount Katahdin to Springer Mountain in Georgia. During their first weeks of hiking, Southbounders must tackle Baxter State Park's 100-Mile Wilderness, the longest stretch without roads.

Some facts

Your body changes. Your feet develop thick, hard callouses. Toenails turn black. You lose about 20 pounds in the first four weeks, then hold steady. Your hair, only periodically washed, produces less oil and changes texture. Your knees feel strong but disturbingly creaky — in Vermont, I wrote to a friend that I felt like a lean and fit 80-year-old man. Over time and distance, you learn how many hours it takes to go 10 miles over flat land. What you need to eat on a day off. At what time of day you should do your big climbs. Exactly how much weight you can carry before your knees ache. How needful you are of walking on your own terms.

The empty hours of hiking are relaxing and monotonous at once. You figure distance in terms of time: six miles is two hours, 40 miles is three days. As you move, your thinking is diffuse. You consider some things closely but more often, it seems, you observe your own thoughts while keeping tabs on your body. Smells, breezes, sudden changes in the weather call forward old memories. The first bars of the Counting Crows' "Round Here" play over and over in your mind's ear as you consider a new soreness in your right heel — until, without warning, the here and now, in the form of a surprised grouse, flies at your head.

Some tips

Carry a cup of dog food as an emergency ration. Unlike extra pasta or rice, Alpo is tempting only when you're in trouble. What can you eat with a fork that you can't eat with a spoon? Cut your toothbrush handle down to the length necessary to hold it steady as you brush. Things fall apart; do you know how to fix your stove? It is cheapest and easiest to purify water with Clorox: one drop per quart, wait 30 minutes. Rip books apart as you read them — no use carrying chapters you have already read, or information about miles already covered. Dental floss doubles as thread. A Band-Aid

covered with duct tape protects blisters better than moleskin. A garbage-bag vest worn against the skin is as warm as a heavy sweater. Ask yourself: What will I not need before I reach the next post office? Whatever you answer, mail it ahead. Mountain Jam and Blue Sky mailed ahead of themselves a "town box" that had shampoo, clean clothes and detergent. Wolf, one of Ward Leonard's protégés, carried only a 15-pound daypack. No tent, no sleeping bag, no rain gear, very little food. He often hiked into the night and slept in the middle of the trail.

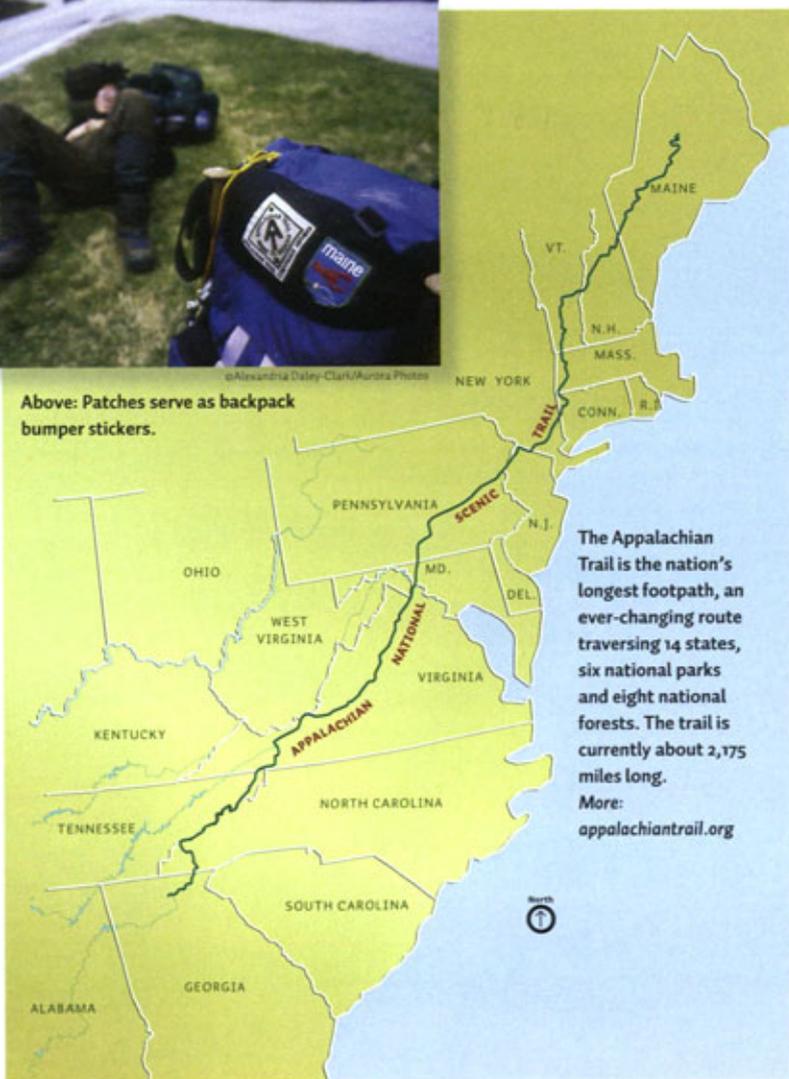
South Egremont, Massachusetts

While hiking, I never heard a thru-hiker say that another had "quit." Most often, the hikers who stopped short were said to have "got off the Trail," which nicely suggests the separation between thru-hiking and all that lies beyond it. Three days after Ward turned north again (to follow a thru-hiking woman he'd found attractive), Kerry and I got off the Trail at his grandfather's house. We had covered 650 miles in all, from Katahdin to southern Massachusetts. After a five-minute walk along a country road, we sat at Kerry's



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Above: Patches serve as backpack bumper stickers.



The Appalachian Trail is the nation's longest footpath, an ever-changing route traversing 14 states, six national parks and eight national forests. The trail is currently about 2,175 miles long.

More: appalachiantrail.org

grandfather's kitchen table, our packs leaning against the lawn chairs on the patio, now a world away from the Trail though we were still within shouting distance of the junction where we had turned off.

One of the remarkable things about the Trail is this separateness it keeps as it winds down through the crowded Eastern mountains. Though it passes through towns and pastures, along roads and sidewalks, the Trail is something set apart from the settled areas from which it is only rarely out of reach. Even weekend hikers feel this, but for thru-hikers, the Trail stands apart from all of the towns, counties and states it passes through in a more profound way. It becomes a separate world, an unfurling narrative of mountains, people and weather. What Wingfoot refers to as "modern recreational thru-hiking" seems ultimately an American form of pilgrimage. The idea is not to break new ground, but to follow the official Trail, which has been cleared and flattened by thousands of others. The frontiers you explore are at the edge of your own personal landscape, and the way you go about that is particularly your own.

Kerry and I, on our first day on the Trail, saw this entry in the register at Hurd Brook Lean-to: "Came out for two days, got my ass eaten by bugs. Miserable. Found exactly what I was looking for: myself. I'll hike out tomorrow." It was not clear whether this was the entry of a thru-hiker. Even so, my immediate reaction was disapproving: This guy is a lightweight, and he's expressing himself in hackneyed terms. Yet it is the very essence of pilgrimage to discover the truth behind received wisdom, not to change it. He "found himself." I'm not sure that I, riding the bus back to Kerry's house in D.C., could say much more than what that bug-eaten hiker had written in the register, except to note the wonderful comedy of finding others doing the same thing. We are, most of us, pilgrims, not pioneers. And we learn that the lessons of any journey are difficult to describe because they are precisely those truths from which clichés are drawn. ■

More: missourireview.com

Literary lost and found

Over 30 years, *The Missouri Review* has made a name for itself by publishing "found texts," previously unpublished items from past writers or history that might not otherwise be read.

Some highlights:

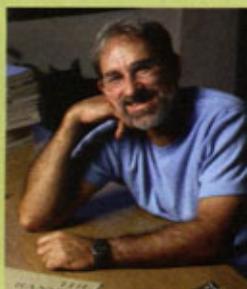
• In 1992, the *Review* published portions of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, unearthed early Jewish theological texts. The issue included an excerpt from the Book of Jubilees, a variant of Genesis.

• In 1994, the *Review* published 15 letters written by beat writer Jack Kerouac to a longtime friend. The letters spanned from 1947, 10 years before *On the Road* and other books made the writer famous, through 1968, when fame and alcoholism had taken their toll on him.

• Mark Twain graced the *Review's* pages in 1995, when the journal published *Colonel Sellers*, a previously unpublished popular play.

• In 1997, the *Review* highlighted MU alumnus Tennessee Williams, who attended in the 1930s, by publishing the rare play *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?*

• A 2000 volume explored a frustration of being a writer — the rejection letter — in the form of a series of rejections of such famed names as Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys and John Barth.



Missouri Review
Editor Speer Morgan

Where they are now

What makes *The Missouri Review* different from some other literary journals? Editor Speer Morgan says each submission gets a fair shake and an honest, thorough reading. That means a lot of work, which is why the internships at the *Review* aren't about coffee runs and filing papers; they're about training future literary editors by letting them sift through the slush pile for the one piece out of 300 that gets published. Interns have gone on to work at magazines such as *The New Yorker* and big publishing houses such as John Wiley and Sons, Unbridled Books, Penguin Group, HarperCollins and Houghton Mifflin and at other literary journals.

Who knew?

Interviews with famous authors often grace the pages of *The Missouri Review*. One such author, Annie Proulx, quoted in 1999, shows that not even she knew what was to come of her work:

"The film rights of the short story 'Brokeback Mountain,' the closing story in the new collection, *Close Range*, were optioned by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, who wrote an exceptionally fine screenplay. What happens next remains to be seen."

The movie won three Oscars in 2006.

Before they were big

The Missouri Review also has discovered its own share of literary greats, including Mizzou's own Bob Shacochis, BJ '73, MS '79. In 1980, the *Review* published Shacochis' story "Hunger." Literary agents in New York read the story, and from there, Shacochis went on to write *Easy in the Islands*, the 1985 winner of the National Book Award. Other success stories published early in the *Review* include Robert Olen Butler, Wally Lamb and Dan Woodrell.

—Chris Blose and Kristine Somerville

