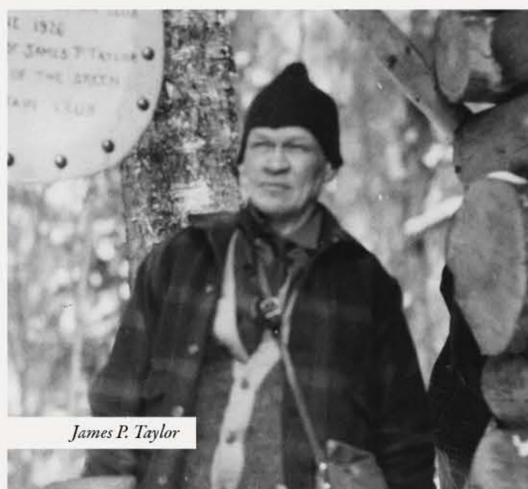


A FOOTPATH IN THE WILDERNESS: THE HISTORY OF THE
LONG TRAIL



James P. Taylor



When James P. Taylor first advanced the idea of a wilderness hiking trail through Vermont's Green Mountains, his vision was as expansive as the landscape itself. People would come to Vermont, fall in love with the trail and the mountains, and grow to love and support the state itself. To that end, he and twenty-two others founded the Green Mountain Club (GMC) on March 11, 1910.

The newly-formed Green Mountain Club intended to build a hiking footpath from Massachusetts to Canada. Construction began in 1912, and the first completed section ran from Sterling Pond to Camel's Hump. Over the next ten years, GMC members and other volunteers constructed an additional 209 miles and raised 44 trail shelters. In 1930, trailblazers cut the final link of the Long Trail from Jay Peak to the Canadian border.

"...to make the Vermont mountains play a larger part in the life of the people."

— mission of the Green Mountain Club since its founding

Over the years, the trail underwent a series of reroutes in some areas to lift it from lower elevations to the high ridgeline. Work continues today to upgrade or relocate the trail to more suitable locations or onto conserved lands.

Through all the trail changes, the experience of hiking on the Long Trail remains a timeless and meaningful endeavor.

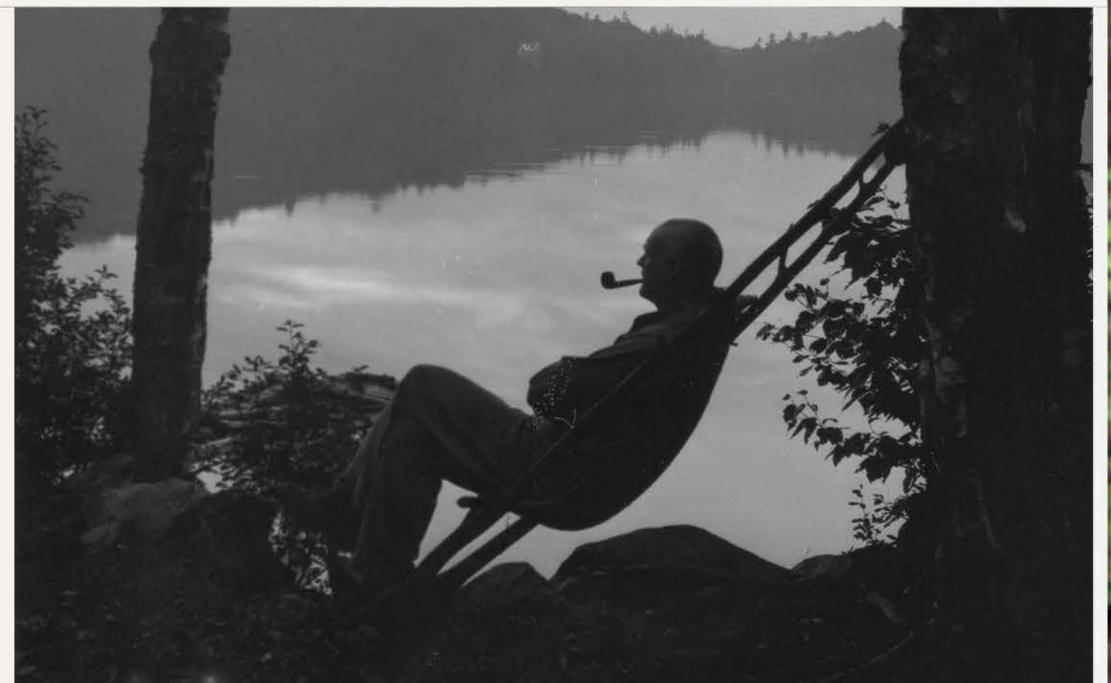
SOLITUDE

Hiking in the Green Mountains, particularly over long distances, can offer a welcome reprieve from the bustle of day-to-day living. The nature of that escape, however, has changed dramatically since the early 1900s.

When the trail was less well-known and travelled, hikers could look forward to the company of the occasional caretaker at day's end. Early caretakers were only stationed at shelters on popular peaks, like Mount Mansfield. Hikers might have also found company in farm families who provided a warm meal and bed for a nominal fee. But during the day, passing a fellow hiker on the trail was rare, and one could walk for miles—days even—without seeing another soul.

A hiking boom in the 1970s changed the hiking experience from true solitude to one that assured you would find company in the woods as more people flocked to the mountains to recreate. Technology today has hikers even more connected to the world; instead of tracking their thoughts and experiences in handwritten journals, some hikers livestream their daily progress to the internet.

Solitude is now harder to find on the trail – but not impossible. Hiking the Long Trail is still a deeply personal and individual experience, no matter how many others share the trail.



MARCH 11, 1910

Twenty-three interested community leaders, assembled by James P. Taylor, meet in Burlington to form the Green Mountain Club.

1912

Volunteers blaze and cut the first section of the Long Trail, a few miles from the summit of Mount Mansfield to Nebraska Notch.

1927

Hilda Kurth, Catherine Robbins, and Kathleen Norris, nicknamed “The Three Musketeers,” become the first women to hike the Long Trail end-to-end.

1930

Though it had been blazed for some years, trail builders Philips D. Carleton and Charles G. Doll cut the last ten miles of the trail, from Jay Peak to Line Post 592 on the Canadian border.

1931

The Green Mountain Club marks completion of the trail, and their twenty-first birthday, with coordinated flares set off from peaks along the spine of the Green Mountains.

COMMUNITY

The spirit of community is expressed both on and off the Long Trail. Since its beginnings, the Green Mountain Club has been organized into sections that correspond to geographic stretches of the Long Trail. Initially, these sections formed in order to cut and build the actual trail itself, but today they are robust volunteer-run chapters who take responsibility for trail maintenance in their areas.

Hikers could find support from local farmers along the trail in the early 1900s. They paid a nominal price for food and shelter and to bunk with the family or in the barn. Some farms grew famous as regular stops and were listed in the Long Trail Guide. Today, towns, known as ‘trail towns,’ welcome hundreds of hikers in a season. Gear and grocery stores, restaurants, laundry facilities, post offices, and other services draw hikers to town.

Hikers can bond together for any number of reasons – common purpose, common interest, or lifelong relationship expressed through hiking. Some groups hike small sections each year over decades, and some families count three or four generations of thru-hikers in their ranks.

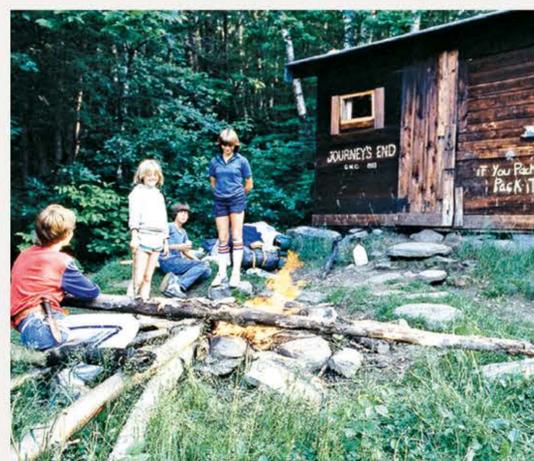
Many hikers adopt trail names as they continue along the Long Trail. Sometimes they choose their own names, and sometimes others choose names for them based on a habit behavior, or some silly thing they did.

If you hiked the Long Trail, what would your trail name be?

Some examples of trail names: More Knorr, Snack Attack, Ranger Ray, Mountain Goat, Fire Feet, Trundler, Tang, String Cheese, Trail Spice, Chili Dog, Hot Chocolate...

1936

The Green Mountain Club board of trustees declares itself “unalterably opposed” to the proposed Green Mountain Parkway, an auto road following the ridgeline of the mountains. The debate was one of the first statewide conversations about the tension between economic growth and scenic beauty. The Parkway was not built, thanks in no small part to the GMC’s advocacy.



1937

The Appalachian Trail – which was inspired by the Long Trail – was built to coincide with the Long Trail for 100 of its 150 miles through Vermont.

1946

After the club’s trail crew (the Long Trail Patrol) had been dissolved for the length of World War II and trail conditions deteriorated through necessary inattention, GMC published the first postwar hiking guidebook.

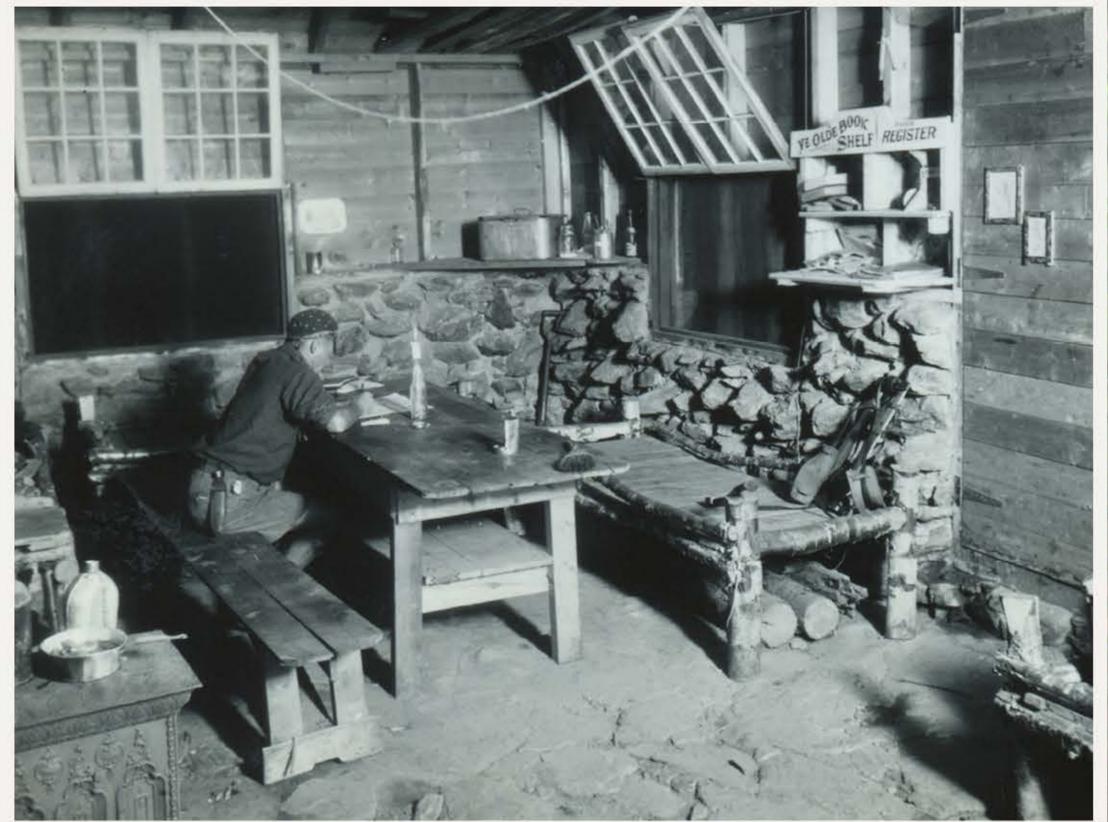
CIVILIZATION

Hiker shelters are an important feature of the Long Trail. Their locations, design, and how they are managed have changed. Early shelters were often rudimentary, using trees harvested nearby and constructed on site. Simple lean-tos or four-sided enclosed camps were the primary styles. By the end of the trail's first decade, there were 44 shelters; today, there are over 70. Many more were built but deteriorated over the years and were abandoned.

Repairing an existing shelter or constructing a new one today is a complicated process. Early shelters are subject to historic preservation guidelines and regulations. Some newer shelters are prefabricated off site or located in one of the six federally designated Wilderness Areas where power tools are prohibited. Lumber, materials, and tools have to be packed in (and out) on foot by GMC field staff and volunteers.

Gone are the days when hikers and trail maintainers could simply dump trash or unused equipment in a pile behind the shelter. In the 1960s, five decades of refuse was packed out by GMC volunteers.

Hikers may also leave the trail for a night or even several days at a time to return to the everyday world. Trail towns with services such as laundry and food stores welcome travelers. And even while still on the trail, today's hikers are much more connected to civilization than their counterparts of a century ago, using technology to connect with friends and family whenever they want.



1969

Vermont passes the landmark State Land Use and Development Plan, also known as Act 250. Among other provisions, it restricts land use above 2,500 feet, something many GMC members were instrumental in championing.

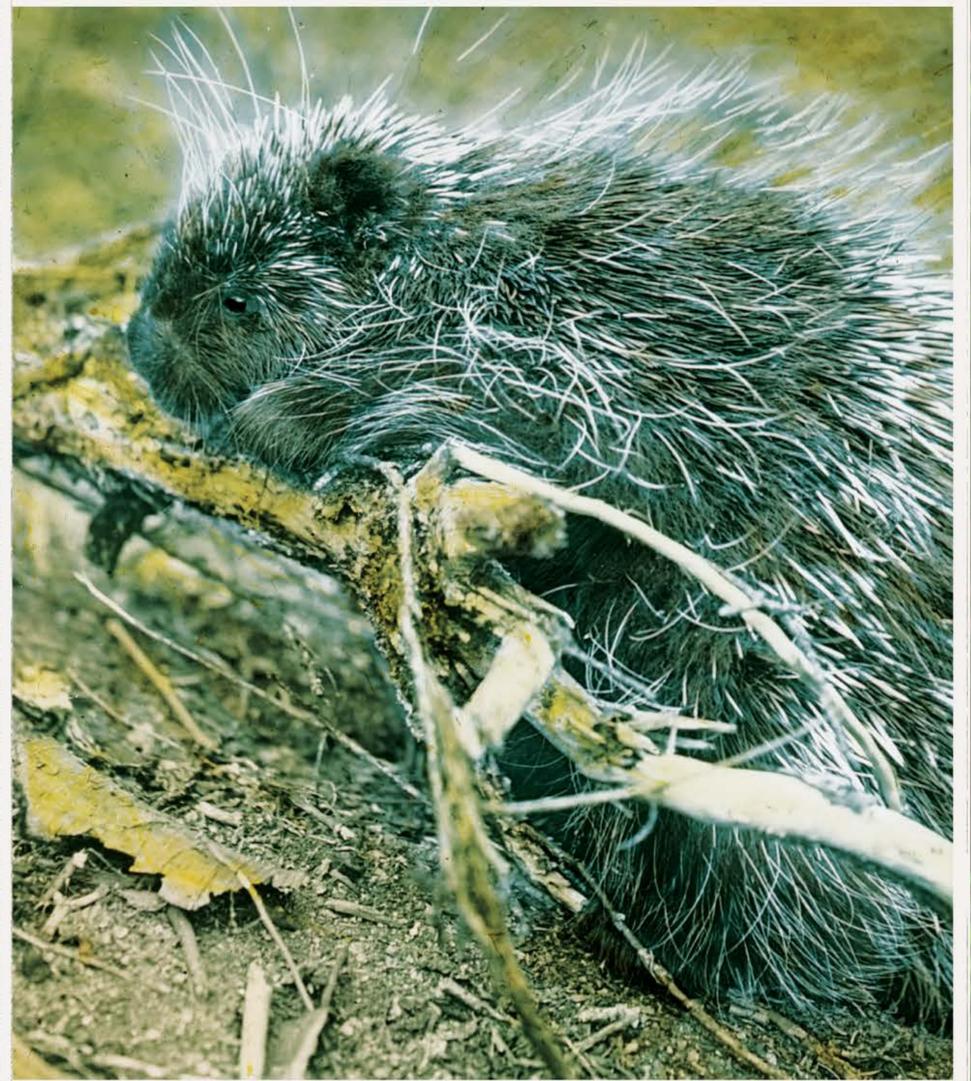
1975

With a huge boom in interest and excitement around hiking, the GMC records 118 end-to-end hikes in one year, the highest number ever. In response to this boom, the GMC revives a Caretaker program to educate the public on conservation and low-impact trail practices.

1977

Larry Van Meter becomes the GMC's first executive director, and in the years since, its professional staff has expanded to include education and communications employees.

WILDERNESS



When the Long Trail was first proposed and built, Vermont was coming out of a long period of heavy overuse of natural resources. Over the nineteenth century, much of the state's forests were clear-cut, and beaver, deer, moose, turkey, bear, otter, wolf, and catamount were heavily hunted, reducing or eliminating their populations.

In their absence, other animals flourished. Early hikers carried a small hatchet for use on the trail and to keep porcupines, which were drawn to the salty creosote painted on shelters, at bay. Today, there are more bear sightings on the trail than ever before. Hikers now carry bear-proof food storage containers and alter their thinking about how to behave in the backcountry.

Early on, the Long Trail traversed mostly private land, crossing hundreds of small farms and woodlots. In the early 1980s, many of the lands that had been safe for decades were put up for sale, and the Green Mountain Club began a concerted effort to purchase or permanently protect the trail. They succeeded, and today only 6.5 miles of the trail are outside of protected land.

Climate change will be the Long Trail's single biggest challenge in the twenty-first century. Severe weather events are becoming more common. Rain can wash out miles of trail, and wind blows down an increasing number of trees every year. Rebuilding trail and removing trees – when every tool is hand-operated and packed in – requires constant effort from section volunteers.

1984

The US Forest Service establishes the Breadloaf Wilderness Area, conserving 25,000 acres of forest as part of the Green Mountain National Forest. The Forest Service and the Green Mountain Club work together to help manage the Breadloaf Wilderness and the seven other designated wilderness areas in Vermont.

1986

The Green Mountain Club launches the Long Trail Protection Campaign to secure land around the Long Trail through outright ownership or conservation easements. Today, all but a few miles of the trail are protected.

2010

The Long Trail celebrates 100 years with statewide celebrations.