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Mills Kelly

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The Class of '51

Back when few knew about the Appalachian Trail, four men pioneered thru-hiking

Mills Kelly

“It’s a long trail . . .”

—*Chester Dziengielewski, October 10, 1951, writing in a trail register on Mount Oglethorpe, Georgia, after walking the entire Appalachian Trail*



IT TAKES A CERTAIN KIND OF PERSON TO WANT TO STRAP ON A BACKPACK and walk more than 2,000 miles through the wilds of the Appalachian Mountains. These days that ambition doesn't seem so odd. Thousands of people do just that every year. But in the spring of 1951, only one person had managed it all in one year, and his story was known only to members of the Appalachian Trail Conference (now Conservancy). Outside of that small community of trail enthusiasts, Earl Shaffer's 1948 thru-hike of the AT might as well never have happened. Which is why, in 1951, when four people hiked the entire AT in one season, each of them was blazing a new path for his life, a new and undiscovered story.

Although they couldn't have known it at the time, those four men, Gene Espy, Chester Dziengielewski, Martin Papendick, and Bill Hall, transformed the AT experience. Three of them hiked the whole way that year. The fourth, Hall, managed 1,700 of the 2,050 miles. Back in 1923, when volunteers completed the first section of the trail at Bear Mountain in New York's Hudson Valley, and even when the trail was declared complete in 1937, no one had imagined thru-hikes. The trail originally was intended to be a path for hikers to traverse for a few hours, a few weeks, or even a month or more. No one in the trail-building community, and certainly not Benton MacKaye who first proposed the project in 1921, imagined that someone would walk the whole trail in a single season. That was a crazy idea.

Since 1951, more than 19,000 hikers have followed in the footsteps of completing a hike of the entire trail. Today the AT is a very crowded place. Each year more than three million people spend a few hours, a few days, a month, or even six months on the trail. Some days at some trail shelters, it can feel like a hundred travelers are trying to find a place to sleep, to pitch a tent, or to hang a hammock.

But the AT was a quiet place in 1951. A hiker might go for days without seeing another human, much less another hiker. That's why, on August 6, 1951 as he hiked south, Chester Dziengielewski stopped at a shelter he had planned on skipping; he had overheard some hikers talking and he wanted to visit with them. The sound of others chatting about their route was enticing enough, but when he heard one of them mention "hiking to Maine," he

Gene Espy and Chester Dziengielewski encountered each other on the Appalachian Trail in 1951. Espy was heading north and Dziengielewski, south. They marked the first meeting of northbound and southbound thru-hikers with this self-timed photograph.

GENE ESPY

changed his plans and turned and marched down to the Smith Gap Shelter (now the LeRoy Smith Shelter). There he shook hands with a young man with a scraggly beard. That was Gene Espy, who was indeed hiking to Maine.

Something unheard-of was happening: A northbound and a southbound thru-hiker were crossing paths on the trail for the first time. Dziengielewski would continue south to Mount Oglethorpe, completing the first successful southbound traverse of the AT. Espy would press on to Katahdin, becoming the second successful northbound thru-hiker after Earl Shaffer in 1948. The grainy photograph of them together that afternoon is the first photograph of a northbound-southbound encounter on the trail.

Each man had left his respective terminus with the same goal: put one foot in front of the other until he reached the other end of the trail. That goal, to finish, and their thru-hiker smell were about the only things Espy and Dziengielewski had in common. Espy, 24, was a U.S. Navy veteran from Cordele, Georgia, who had recently graduated from Georgia Tech University with a degree in engineering. Dziengielewski, 27, was the son of Polish immigrants from Naugatuck, Connecticut, a machinist in a local mill who lived with and looked after his mother. Espy had set out to challenge himself. Dziengielewski wanted “to satisfy an old wanderlust feeling, to do something outstanding—different from my usual routine.”

Although Espy had been an avid hiker as a young man, he had never embarked on a quest quite like the 2,050-mile journey from Georgia to Maine. (The trail today is about 2,190 miles long.) Dziengielewski had tried to cover the whole distance the year before. He made it to Delaware Water Gap in Pennsylvania (almost halfway) before running out of money and dropping out.

Espy traveled in military surplus clothing and carried a pack that averaged 45 pounds, whereas Dziengielewski preferred shorts and short sleeve shirts, cooked his meals in an old coffee can, and carried a pack that averaged no more than 15 pounds. Espy carried a tent; Dziengielewski carried a sheet of plastic in which he rolled up when it rained. In short, they were two archetypes of the current AT thru-hiker community: the organized hiker with just the right gear for every circumstance, and the “hiker trash” ultralight hiker who carried no more than he absolutely had to.

That night, the two men “had a grand time,” Espy said, sharing a meal and swapping stories of their hike, although Espy was somewhat appalled by the state of Dziengielewski’s gear. “His cooking utensil was an old scorched coffee can that looked as if it had been in constant use since the War Between

the States,” Espy wrote later. Dziengielewski thought it was funny that Espy seemed afraid to eat anything that had been cooked in that coffee can. The two parted the next morning and did not meet again until after they had completed their hikes—Espy on Katahdin on September 30 and Dziengielewski on Oglethorpe (which was then the southern terminus) on October 10.

THEY DID NOT KNOW THAT OTHERS WERE TRYING TO THRU-HIKE THAT YEAR. Bill Hall, 19, from East Liverpool, Ohio, and Martin Papendick, 29, from Flint, Michigan, were walking south a few days behind Dziengielewski the night he sat down for dinner with Espy. Papendick finished the trail two weeks after Dziengielewski. Hall skipped almost 300 miles of the route in southwestern Virginia—the old, mostly road walking sections that were abandoned by the ATC in 1952 in favor of the current route in the Jefferson National Forest—and he caught up with Dziengielewski in the Smoky Mountains. The two arrived at Mount Oglethorpe together. Hall politely lagged behind at the finish so that Dziengielewski could have his moment in the sun on Mount Oglethorpe, even though there was no one else to observe his arrival.

The very idea of a thru-hike had seemed ludicrous and even vaguely suspicious to the leaders of the local trail clubs. When a retired shoe factory worker from Binghamton, New York, named Galen Tingley attempted a thru-hike in 1947, the president of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) felt he needed to warn the superintendent of Shenandoah National Park to be on the lookout for a hiker who was “white-haired, slender built, slightly stooped; best known for his trait of securing free meals wherever he stops.” Some, like the eccentric Danish hiker Eiler Larsen, came close to hiking the whole thing, but no one managed it until Shaffer in 1948. Even Shaffer had competition that year. Only a miscommunication caused students Paul Yambert and Jim Callaway to leave the trail before completing their hike. (Several others had walked every step of the trail—just not in one season. ATC Chairman Myron Avery, Appalachian Mountain Club member Dr. George W. Outerbridge of Philadelphia and his medical partner Dr. Martin Kilpatrick and his wife Mary Kilpatrick hiked it all in sections over several years. Mary Kilpatrick was the first woman to hike every step of the AT.)

Public skepticism of single-season AT journeys changed in 1948. At first, no one believed Shaffer when he claimed to have hiked the whole thing. He was forced to sit through an intense grilling by ATC Secretary Jean Stephenson, and later from ATC Chairman Myron Avery. Both reluctantly agreed that Shaffer had, indeed, hiked it all. Even so, Stephenson was not willing

to admit that thru-hiking would become popular. She doubted anyone else would try it. In her report on Shaffer's hike in the *Appalachian Trailway News*, Stephenson wrote,

Mr. Shaffer's immediate past experience had particularly conditioned him for a trip of this nature. It will probably be some time before anyone who attempts a through trip has the unusual experience and training that made it possible for Mr. Shaffer to succeed in such a journey.

"Some time" turned out to be just three years. The hikers in the "Class of 1951" showed the ATC and the American hiking community in general that thru-hiking the AT was not a "stunt," as some had termed Shaffer's hike. It was something anyone with a sense of adventure, determination, sufficient resources, and enough free time could aspire to.

Those four heralded a new era in long-distance backpacking in the United States. According to historian Silas Chamberlin, hikers had explored American trails as part of clubs, largely made up of members of an urban elite,



Appalachian Trail founder Benton MacKaye (second from left) with Chester Dziengielewski (far left), Bill Hall, and Gene Espy (far right) at the annual meeting of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club in 1952. COURTESY GEORGIA ARCHIVES, APPALACHIAN TRAIL CLUB, GEORGIA RECORDS

for more than a century. But, according to Chamberlin, between 1945 and 1970, “the size of the American hiking community grew exponentially, as tens of millions of people went to the nation’s trails for the first time.” But, like Espy, Dziengielewski, Papendick, and Hall (and Shaffer before them), they hiked alone or in small, unorganized groups, rather than as part of an organized club activity. Shaffer’s hike had been remarkable because it was unprecedented. But the hikers in the Class of ’51 demonstrated that almost anyone could hike 2,000 miles, as long as they had the resources and the will.

After 1951, no one could again write, as Jean Stephenson did in 1948, that it would be a long time before someone else attempted a thru-hike of the AT.

Their hikes in 1951 also signaled the end of an era in American outdoor history. For centuries, the wilderness had been a place to conquer, a place where people proved themselves against the elements, the slopes, and the beasts of the forest. Through strenuous activity away from the conveniences of modern industrial society, hikers could test themselves and their character, and find a new purpose in life. Fifty years before the Class of ’51 hit the trail, President Theodore Roosevelt had urged Americans to lead “clean, vigorous, and healthy lives.” Earl Shaffer echoed Roosevelt in a letter to Jean Stephenson describing the achievements of Espy, Hall, Papendick, and Dziengielewski: “A young man can do a lot worse things to prove himself than to walk the length of the Appalachian Trail. By the time he gets that far, he’ll know he isn’t a weakling, either mentally or physically, and he’ll never regret the trip.”

Ironically, none of the hikers in the Class of ’51 saw it that way. They were hiking the AT because they wanted to take a nice long trip, see some new things, and enjoy nature. None of them described his hike as having a higher purpose or as a test of personal grit. In that, they were also foreshadowing a new approach to long-distance hiking. By the late 1960s, the notion of testing oneself for the purpose of self-improvement and civic virtue had all but faded from the consciousness of AT thru-hikers. Instead of being proponents of a clean and vigorous life, they were members of the baby boomer generation, who journeyed into the forests to find themselves, to escape the modern world, to leave behind the regimentation of the workplace, and to test their stamina much like the growing legions of runners and other fitness enthusiasts. They saw in the AT a chance to obtain what work, society, and their home lives could not provide, through a mixture of physical challenge and the transcendental qualities of nature. The trail they hiked by 1970 was also much more like the trail hikers find today—rapidly federalizing, increasingly well maintained, and increasingly crowded.

The trail conditions the Class of '51 walked differed substantially from what hikers experience now. Unlike today, when the AT often feels crowded and even overrun with hikers, the members of the Class of '51 rarely met another person on the trail. And all four hikers struggled with the effects of a terrible drought across the mid-Atlantic and Southeast that had begun that summer and continued for the next four years.

In many stretches, the AT was overgrown and often difficult to locate, and a substantial portion of the trail involved walking on roads. For example, the 1941 edition of the official guide to the trail in Virginia gave the following directions:

Continue south along semi-cleared ridge crest. At 1.35 m. come into open field, descending close to woods on left. Bear left at end of clearing, following close to woods on right. Descend steeply. At 1.65 m. turn sharp right on grass-grown road. . . . Cross thru farmyard at 9.66 m., then follow close to edge of woods. Cross brook in woods and, in 100 ft., turn right on dirt road at 10 m.

In New England, significant stretches of trail were blocked by downed trees, the detritus of two major hurricanes in 1938 and 1944 that had roared through the region. Many segments were poorly blazed, if they were blazed at all. Long stretches of the trail lacked any sort of shelter or hostel, and hikers often found shelter by knocking on doors to ask permission to sleep in a barn or outbuilding. The trail guidebooks from this period include names, addresses, and sometimes telephone numbers of local residents who would take in hikers for the night. If hikers couldn't find a shelter, they often camped by the side of a road, which sometimes turned dangerous. Espy reported that once in Virginia a drunk driver pulled up on the road near his tent, accused him of being a communist draft dodger, and promised to run him over if he didn't move along. In small towns curious citizens would follow them, wondering if they were vagabonds, or just plain crazy. Hikers' beards puzzled people in 1951, when a man with a beard was usually thought to be a "hobo" or a dangerous radical. He certainly wasn't respectable.

In some places the hikers of 1951 found entire mountainsides logged with no path in sight. If they asked for directions, local citizens often shrugged their shoulders, surprised that there was a trail nearby at all. If they did know about the AT, they often called it "that government trail" and wondered why anyone would be odd enough to try to walk it. The trail was in such bad shape in some stretches that Espy later described the conditions as "deplorable," and Hall

recounted several instances where he had to bushwhack his own route over a mountain before finding the trail again. Sometimes they ran into moonshiners who weren't happy to see a stranger walking through "their" woods.

Among the biggest challenges all four men faced was the Kennebec River in Maine. In 2017, more than 2,800 hikers used the Kennebec River Ferry Service to cross this sometimes dangerous and unpredictable river. In 1951, hikers had to find their own way across, either by fording, or finding a local citizen with a boat. There were no ferries until the late 1980s. Dziengielewski reported losing all of his food while trying to cross on foot. Hall, who considered himself an experienced riverman (he had canoed more than 2,000 miles down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from Pittsburgh to New Orleans when he was 17), described his chagrin at attempting to pole across the river in someone's boat while several people watched from shore rolling their eyes:

The current pressed the boat downstream and I stood helplessly in the midst of the log-filled Kennebec. Casting a glance at the bow of the boat, I caught a glimpse of a familiar and friendly object—a paddle. Yippee, here was something I knew how to use! I made the shore some 200 feet below the landing.

Like so many of the hikers who set off on a thru-hike of the AT today, all four members of the Class of '51 began their hikes with too much gear, and, with the exception of Dziengielewski, little knowledge of the AT itself or what to expect. Papendick seemed the least prepared of the four, despite having hiked a substantial section of the emerging Pacific Crest Trail the year before. He reported that he began his thru-hike on Katahdin carrying 65 pounds of food and gear.

The heavy weight of his pack almost ended his hike before he made it out of New Hampshire's White Mountains. At the AMC hut at Pinkham Notch, he caught up with Bill Hall and the teenager managed to convince Papendick, who was older and had served in the Navy during World War II, to reduce his pack down to less than 40 pounds. In a letter to Earl Shaffer, Hall described Papendick as more than a little eccentric, eating meals cold from the can and his oatmeal raw, and he refused to throw away either of his two flashlights, because he preferred hiking at night. He called his night hikes "katydid strolls."

But Dziengielewski and Hall quickly became what today we call ultralight hikers. In the White Mountains, Hall threw away his pack, rolled his sleeping bag into his poncho, kept only a large knife, food, and his toothbrush until

he arrived in Hanover. There, he purchased an Army “jungle pack,” which was essentially a rainproof pouch attached to webbing straps. Hall later told Shaffer that he liked it because it was so small that it wouldn’t hold too much gear. Dziengielewski’s rig was even lighter than Hall’s. The machinist from Connecticut carried only fifteen pounds of gear for most of the trip—something only the most fanatical ultralight hikers can achieve today: a sleeping bag, a plastic sheet, his coffee can pot, a tablespoon, and an old nail he used to punch holes in cans before prying them open with the spoon. Like the other three, he also carried a snakebite kit, a sweater, a change of socks, a toothbrush, and toothpaste.

THEIR HIKE CONCLUDED, ALL FOUR MEN BECAME, BRIEFLY, CELEBRITIES IN the AT community. The ATC invited the three who completed the entire trail to write something for the *Appalachian Trailway News*; Jean Stephenson, no longer a thru-hiking skeptic, interviewed them and published the transcript in *Appalachia*; and a number of the local trail-maintaining clubs invited them to their annual meetings, feting them as heroes. Perhaps the most exciting moment of all came at the annual meeting of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club in 1952, when Espy, Dziengielewski, and Hall got to meet Benton MacKaye.

Hiking celebrity is a fleeting thing. After their grand adventures, all four men faded into the background of the AT story. Papendick traveled west in 1952 and completed the first traverse from Canada to Mexico on what eventually became the Pacific Crest Trail. Throughout his life he was bitter that his 1952 hike wasn’t recognized as the first PCT thru-hike, and he came to believe that a conspiracy among the leading outdoor organizations was preventing him from receiving the recognition he deserved. Dziengielewski returned to Connecticut and spent the rest of his life caring for his mother and working in a local mill. Hall became an Army helicopter pilot in the Korean War, evacuating wounded soldiers to mobile Army surgical hospital (M.A.S.H.) units. Only Espy, who was 92 as of this writing, stayed connected to the AT community. He is still informally advising the Appalachian Trail Museum in Pine Grove Furnace State Park, Pennsylvania. Espy said in an interview in August 2019 that when he arrived at the Katahdin summit, his only thought was that he wanted to just keep on hiking north.

In 1952, three more people completed thru-hikes of the trail, including Mildred Norman, the first woman to thru-hike the AT. Year by year, the number of thru-hikers grew, and by 1974 so many people were completing

thru-hikes that the ATC stopped requiring hikers to prove they actually hiked the whole thing, moving instead to the current system of voluntary certification. Under this current system, hikers fill out a form describing their hike—when they began, when they finished—and providing basic personal information, which they then send to the ATC offices in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

In 1954 the hiking community was captivated by the story of 67-year-old Emma Gatewood, from Ohio, who hiked it alone in tennis shoes, carrying only a few bits of gear. The legend of Grandma Gatewood soon displaced the story of the Class of '51 in the public's imagination, but they and Earl Shaffer before them had shown that a thru-hike of the AT wasn't a stunt nor was it a herculean feat. It was just a very long walk.

MILLS KELLY is a professor of history at George Mason University. He also directs George Mason's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, where he and his students are building a digital history of the Appalachian Trail.