

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2017: Stories from the
Albums*

Article 6

2017

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Recommended Citation

Manikian, Sally (2017) "A Woman in the Woods, Working: A Trail Leader Learns to Trust Her Own Steady Hand," *Appalachia*: Vol. 68 : No. 2 , Article 6.

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A Woman in the Woods, Working

A trail leader learns to trust her own steady hand

Sally Manikian



THE TRAIL TO ETHAN POND CAMPSITE IS SHORT. SHORT, BUT ALSO one of my least favorite walks. It starts out suddenly and dramatically steep. The trail is so steep it seems to rise up and hit my chin. On the same trail on my first backpacking trip as a teenager, I threw down my pack in crushing defeat. For almost a decade, and in so many different kinds of weather, I continued to haul up that trail for work, first when I trained as a new caretaker for the Appalachian Mountain Club, and later when I supervised and trained caretakers myself.

On my last trip to Ethan Pond for work, in September 2015, I passed a group of high school girls stalled on the steep pitch. One or two straggled at the back, losing their spirits, and several others struggled ahead of them. I paused and talked to them for a moment or two as I coaxed my shy sled dog, Gunnar, past. I appreciated the break in the sun and heat as I headed up to check on a crew of young men replacing two platforms and restoring the shelter. I expected that I would view their progress, advise, and maybe lend a hand. They were the construction crew, after all, and I was the desk jockey who had devised the project. I wore long pants and leather boots and had brought work gloves and my camera. I wasn't expecting to stay long.

Forty-five minutes or so later, I arrived at the calm and bright edge of Ethan Pond. I heard silence. Stillness in the woods usually pleases me, but I had expected to hear the sounds of industry: the scrape and chop of wood-working, the roar of a chain saw carving, hammers bang-bang-banging, and a generator humming. And the crew chatting.

It was late enough in the morning and in their workweek that I expected they would be finished building two platforms, stacking the old lumber for the helicopter that would collect it. I looked for their collective energy standing around the shelter, putting it to rights.

Instead, silence.

IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF MY TRAILS JOB, I HELD THE INANE IDEA THAT only men knew how to build things. The skills like holding drills steady, picking the right lumber, mixing gas and oil, sharpening edges—all must be genetically coded. I thought that a man could use a tool as easily as a measuring tape.

Sally Manikian notched this log faster than the man with the chainsaw at a 2011 workshop in Montana. COURTESY OF SALLY MANIKIAN

Throughout the five years I took care of shelters, huts, and lodges as a seasonal employee, I shied away from strange tools and felt guilty around tools I recognized but did not know how to use. So many skilled people representing decades of construction and years of trail work surrounded me in the field. They moved efficiently, intuitively grasped solutions. They knew when they needed a lock washer and when they didn't. I had spent so many years reading books and writing theories that I had never held a cordless drill or swung a hammer with success or accuracy.

Of course, a love of landscape and wildness, and an almost philosophical respect for hands-on work, had drawn me to trail stewardship. I advanced in my career to lead these crews not because I could use tools, but because I understood the bigger picture and deeper challenges for the mountain projects. At the interview for my full-time job, I hesitated at the questions about construction experience. But most questions cut to those abilities that can't be taught, like how to manage conflict, how to direct work, and an understanding of why trail work matters.

AS A VOLUNTEER, EARLY IN MY CAREER, I HAD STUMBLING INTO construction work and done my best. Once I had found myself coordinating the restoration work at the Perch, a Randolph Mountain Club shelter on the flanks of Mount Adams. I hired the contractor, arranged the helicopter pilot who would fly in the logs, and pulled together the volunteers. I stayed in touch with them and visited them weekly.

On one trip that year, I carried up hardware and gasoline for the generator and then moved equipment from one shelter to another. I arrived at the Perch to find a frenzy of activity. The shelter was cribbed in place, the floor and lower logs removed, and a new rock foundation was being slowly constructed. The two caretakers were working with the crew, blending in seamlessly. I wasn't sure where I fit in. I didn't know how to start the generator, as I was totally confused by all gasoline engines that required a choke.

I feared the Sawzall because the times I'd held one, the blade had jumped so wildly that I couldn't cut anything. Circular saws back then represented not tools but a way to lose fingers. I felt powerless and incapable. Faced with the overwhelming capability of those I managed, those who staffed the program I ran, I didn't know what to do.

But then, as I was leaving, I was talking to a volunteer named Chris. "I'm just the one who pays the bills," I said.

"That's work," he said, in affirmation.



Joe Roman (left), Declan Scannell, and James Vittetau rig up the Ethan Pond Shelter with an iron rope in preparation for hoisting it back into plumb. SALLY MANIKIAN

SOMETIMES I FEEL THAT I CHEATED. THAT I HAD BYPASSED THE necessary years of using tools and building things, encoding knowledge into muscle memory, and had jumped right to supervising those who knew those skills, designing the projects they would carry out. In such a mindset, how could I be learning while leading? How could I, with soft hips in men's pants, lead the wiry-limbed men who worked for me?

In 2011, I spent a week in Missoula, Montana, learning the techniques and skills of log building restoration—that is, replacing rotten logs with new ones. I felt excited that I'd work beneath the big sky and tall tamarack trees and labor alongside people I not only didn't know but wouldn't have to lead.

The routine was so different than in the East. Pack mules carried our gear over flat trails along a river. The same mules that carried our gear returned the next day to haul felled trees out of the woods. But, just like at home, the instructor was a man who seemed more comfortable talking to men, the person cooking meals was a woman, and I was the lone woman in a group of six.

But to my surprise, the instructor's chain-saw certification had lapsed to a level where he required supervision. I was the only person holding a B-level certification. Thus I found myself, with my six months of chain-saw experience, supervising someone with 40 years of practice.

"I was born with a chain saw in my hand," he said as he started cutting.

That remark failed to intimidate me. I did not need to lead him. I just needed to listen to him and watch him. I spent that week in Missoula in quiet willingness. I couldn't wait to hold the chain saw, to practice the gentle sway of the broad ax, and to test the steady hand I wasn't sure I had. Without speaking and with deep focus, I peeled back shavings with a hand chisel, trying different angles to see what was most effective. I stepped up often, reaching for the offered tool handle. On a whim, I raced one of my peers in a notching challenge on the same log, he with a chain saw and me with an ax. I, with the ax, won.

In my journal on the first night, as I tallied up what I'd learned that day, I wrote that I'd never felt more "ol' boy'ed" before. I added, "I'm being viewed as an equal for the first time."

Before that week, I had never really had the opportunity to learn without also having to lead or without feeling I had to prove myself. But in Montana, I felt like an equal, even though we all had different levels of experience. The first night I tallied what I had *learned*. The second night, I tallied what I had *done*. I had hewn an 18-foot tree with an ax, without tiring. I had notched a log with a chain saw, split a 42-inch round of larch with the swing of a giant mallet, leveled and chalk-lined and measured angles. And, I noted in my journal, I had done them well.



The inside of the Ethan Pond Shelter, after a straightening. JOE ROMAN

I drew diagrams, I wrote a tool list for projects, I opened myself to let all of the learning sink in, deeply. I never felt doubt or inadequacy. In being pulled so far away from the tension of so many construction projects, I found the break with self that I so desperately needed.

My brain, for the first time, began to gently learn the mechanics of finding

straight planes in round logs, to see how the angles form a sturdy structure, and to find the ways to honor the history in preservation techniques. I also started to connect the lines and curves of logs to the tools that helped put them together. It was the same eye and mind that made it possible for me to sense the movement that carved glacial rivers and valleys, the power of wind that rubs the White Mountains raw. It was the start of seeing the living structure, a simple system of cause and effect, seeing movement in stillness.

As we pulled apart the rotted logs in the cabin we were repairing, I could feel my hands pulling apart the logs at Gentian Pond, at Guyot Shelter. I could see the brown logs of Ethan Pond Shelter standing clean and unrotten, asking not to be replaced but for something else.

TWO WEEKS AFTER LEAVING MONTANA, I HIKED TO GENTIAN POND Shelter with a crew of two. We would begin replacing logs. They carried the generator and most of the tools and equipment. I carried what weight I could. In my head, I held on to the confidence I had learned in the woods of Montana. I held on to the techniques of scribing tools, of handheld chisels and wooden mallets.

The first week we pulled up the floor, removed the old logs, and braced it into place. This sheer grunt work and slow movement were easy to lead. I watched the level to make sure that when we lifted the shelter we did so evenly. Our conversation was less about my lacking skills and more about watching whether the shelter was going to fall off the bracing.

In the second week, I could start using what I had quickly and fully learned in Montana, but I didn't feel confident. My voice began to waver. The skills were not etched in my bones or part of my breath. I knew that I could either exercise what I knew, or I could relinquish control and not try at all.

I chose to exercise what I knew. I drew lines on the shelter and on logs. I found the center line and the round log's flatter edge. I kept trying to see what I had seen so clearly in Montana. I could not explain to the crew what I was doing because I did not quite know what I was doing, myself.

For a few days, Dave Salisbury, my coworker and dear friend, joined us. What I tried to do with tools of measurement, he could accomplish by dead reckoning. He had a practiced swing of his hatchet as he hewed logs. Instead of lifting the scribe tool, he shoved the saw blind in between logs and asked me to warn him about spikes. He understood something I didn't yet, which was that we must channel the method the shelter's original builders had used.

We needed that sense of “just about right.” To do so, we must set aside the measuring tools and trust our hands and senses.

We worked at Gentian Pond for more than two years. The first year, we worked the wood; the second, we built new foundation posts. In that second year, I returned to work with the two-person crew for a day and spent most of that time using the rock drill to shave back ledge rock, making space for the post base. Beau and Toby were quiet and efficient. I felt comfortable with them as I used the rock drill. It felt as it had in Montana. I used chisels and the broad ax. I felt comfortable, I felt playful, I felt that I was exploring the tools. The world shrank to just myself and the task at hand. No one else was watching.

Or so I thought. The next week, Beau showed me the series of photos he’d taken of me while I was deeply focused on the rock and dust and the loud roar of the drill. I liked what I saw in those photos, an earnest lean in, a nonchalant brush of dust, and a stance of stability and strength.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, WE HAD KNOWN ETHAN POND SHELTER SAT crookedly. It listed and leaned to the right, precarious but never precarious enough to keep people from sleeping in it. I know because I had slept in it while rain roared on the unsheathed tin roof. My predecessor had applied for National Park Service funding because Ethan Pond is on the Appalachian Trail. But in 2010, when I was on the job, I decided we would not replace Ethan Pond Shelter with that funding. One reason was that the logs were healthy and the shelter, although small and leaning, was otherwise sound. The other reason was that the shelter’s age, more than 50 years, would require a great deal of red tape, like additional reviews. I decided it would be easier to wait, figure out how to realign Ethan Pond, and assign the funding elsewhere, so I instead scheduled the replacement of Garfield Ridge Shelter in 2011.

After coming back from Montana, after replacing Garfield’s shelter and repairing Gentian, I was able to look at Ethan differently. On a site visit with Beau, we looked at the platforms, the outhouse, and then the shelter itself. I looked closer.

“It’s not leaning; it’s twisting,” I said.

The vertical logs were wracking out of alignment. The structure looked like it leaned to one side when viewed from the front, but it was twisting throughout. The back logs leaned in a different direction than the front ones did. I placed my hand on the soft, worn logs, not fully understanding how they fit together. I saw the hand-hewn notches, the dowels plugging up holes, and the glowing honey brown of the healthy spruce logs. If we could

straighten the shelter by incorporating angles of stability, we could, for a bit longer, hold on to the history of the AMC trail crew's handiwork with skinny logs left from a timber project, back in 1957.

Our pathway to designing Ethan's reconstruction was long. After the first field visit in 2012, we waited two years before the U.S. Forest Service approved the straightening project. In 2015, we planned the work on the shelter and replacement of the nearby tent platforms. In the in-between years, my coworkers in the Trails Department and I visited Ethan Pond. We also completed two different shelter restoration projects with the USFS on its shelters. Doing that work, I paid attention and learned how to fix Ethan.

From Mountain Pond Shelter (in the Saco District), a structure twisting with vertical logs, I pulled the idea of bracing the corners. From the Perch beneath Edmands Col, I pulled the idea of anchoring with a Griphoist (a manual hoist). From Montana came the attention to historical detail, of plugging the holes drilled. In each shelter project, especially when I was a simple crew member, I learned to reach for the right tools.

ON THAT SUNNY SEPTEMBER DAY IN 2015, I CROSSED THE OUTLET of Ethan Pond. Clear, glass-blue water on my left, and the rocks under my feet. I still wondered at the silence, where the crew was and what they were doing, how I would need to behave and act when I arrived.

I entered the woods at the edge of the pond and still saw no human activity, heard no noise, and saw no tools or cuts or rigging. As I climbed the last pitch, Ethan Pond Shelter came into view. I found myself staring at those familiar wracking logs, wondering where my crew was and why they weren't working.

Eventually I found them in the cooking area, three guys sitting and standing and eating.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Why haven't you started the shelter work yet?"

"We were waiting for you," they said. "We don't know what we're supposed to do."

To me, the project was simple. We'd discussed and debated and developed it for years. Wrap the shelter with iron rope and then hoist it back into plumb with a Griphoist. Next, eight pieces of bracing would hold the alignment, in each corner. Then release the iron rope and Griphoist, and the shelter would stay. I had cut the trees for bracing the year before, and the summer caretaker had peeled the bark.

In a few rapid minutes, we had the rigging set up. We positioned a Griphoist in line with the side of the shelter that was wracking away, and we cinched the entire shelter with the rope, wrapping it around twice and then anchoring it to that Griphoist. We set up a second Griphoist as a static hold on the front post, to keep the shelter from sliding off the foundation as we pulled on it from the side. The iron rope we used looked as thin as dental floss in proportion to the shelter itself, but I knew from experience that it was very strong.

Directing the crew—Joe, James, and Declan—I adapted as we went. There was a general plan of how it was going to work, but that always plays out a little bit differently on the ground. The trees are never in exact places, the ground is uneven, and some piece of gear always seems to be missing. With each adaptation, I felt the crew members solving problems on their own but also looking to me for assurance. I could sense their uncertainty as they picked up tools, doing things like trying to cut the iron rope with a pair of brush clippers.

I had hired and trained these three, who had a combined knowledge of more than twelve years' time in the woods, building trails. And they had been waiting, not knowing what to do in their work, for the woman—me. My hands had held many tools without knowing how to wield them. It was a surprising feeling, being awaited.

I stood in front of the shelter, took one last look at the ropes and Griphoists and the three-man crew, and gave the command, "Tension."

WATCHING THE SHELTER COME INTO ALIGNMENT WAS LIKE WATCHING a flower bloom. The Griphoist pulled slowly, subtly, and powerfully. When I closed my eyes briefly and looked back, I noticed the difference and the gentle movement. Occasional pops and cracks alerted us all to the gravity of the work and the seriousness of the task. And then, the shelter was straight.

I had not planned on spending a late and long day with the crew, and I left them to tackle the work of matching logs to corners in the areas and locations that I had laid out for them. One of the crew members kept asking clarifying questions, worried about getting it right; another nodded when I pointed to a corner, his mind working through the mechanics. The giddiness of seeing my guesswork play out flushed through my veins. I was happy.

As I got ready to go back down to the road, I tried to inspire in them that thing that took me so long to understand: that the task of straightening

an old and dear shelter is not one of total straight lines, of measured Speed Square angles or of engineered perfection. I tried to inspire in them trust in their skills.

I wanted them to set aside any contrived measurement, to begin to see what I had slowly learned to see over the years, the breathing logs, the angles that create stability, and the movement needed to put things in place. The artistry that emerges from guesswork and trusting your own steady hand and the tools it holds.

This unleashing of trust took me ten years. For some, it is faster; for some, it might never happen. I give thanks that it happened, for me, at all.

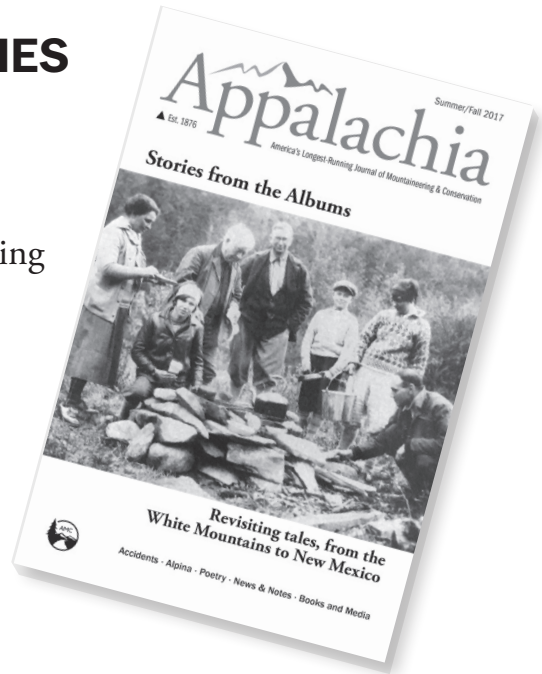
SALLY MANIKIAN of Shelburne, New Hampshire, formerly coordinated shelters and trail work for the Appalachian Mountain Club. She now works as the Vermont and New Hampshire representative for The Conservation Fund.

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