The Evolution of a Trail Worker

By Matt Moore

It was pouring. Under my six-by-eight tarp I squirmed, continually shining my headlamp around to see if any of the rivulets of water were coming any closer to me. I had accepted a certain amount of dampness as collateral damage, had accepted that I would be lucky to log four total hours of sleep. Now the only adversary was hypothermia, and I was confident, as I jimmied my umbrella in between my head and the mouth of the tarp, that I would face the next day warm enough and looking forward to sunshine. I recommend if you are to "go light" on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia in the early spring that you bring an eight-by-ten tarp. Ample could only describe a six-by-eight if you were a four-year-old or wanted to keep your backpack dry in its very own accommodations. My 6"2' frame was as fetal as it could get; my backpack, long sacrificed to a soaking, served as a deflecting wall for the splashback that was hammering the muddy duff relentlessly. It was a powerful storm, and with the ridgeline of my tarp inches from my shoulder, my umbrella constantly flapping out of position (I ultimately decided it was just as useless in all other applications, but feel free to experiment), and burgeoning streamlets coursing under my Ridgerest, it dumped all night. It was as rainy a storm as I have ever experienced, although those droplets smacking the tarp inches from my ears lent the storm a dramatic percussive soundtrack that could be fueling a slight exaggeration. All I mean to tell you is it rained, a lot.

"The sun will come out, tomorrow…" On the AT, cliché songs really have a way of working themselves into your psyche, your very mental fabric. How disappointing, at first, to find that whereas you had expected on your pilgrimage to contemplate the human condition, or deep ecology, or you have that Audubon Society book of birds in your pack and figured you'd get better with bird identification; how disappointing then to find yourself hiking along intently humming "I would walk five hundred miles…" But I think there is a deep comfort in those remnants of popular culture; they serve as a buoy in a sea of wilderness, particularly when you arise (not awake) from such a torrential night to see a feint hint of early sunshine through the trees. Right you are, Annie, right you are. And off we go humming down the trail, the clouds part, and we all sigh relief.

As more distance accumulates between me and my experiences, I find it interesting and instructive to note which experiences have stuck to the memory. Certain moments, sentiments, places in time that at the time did not seem particularly noteworthy are so readily accessible, so vivid. I can similarly sense that there were moments I was sure were laden with importance as I experienced them, but that now I have just kind of forgotten. I was hiking down the trail that day, watching the clouds part, and slogging through the ankle-deep water that was flowing down the trail. I did not make much note of it, I had chosen to hike in sandals partly to make those kinds of things easier to handle, knowing that wet feet are a reality of any distance hike. But as a group of us took a snack break, a woman hiked up and complained, as thru-hikers are wont to do, "Would it have killed them to put some waterbars in there?"

This is the moment, the moment I remember so well. The statement struck me. I was on my second hike of that section, on a 500 mile "Nostalgia Tour '04," the nostalgia being for my 1999 thru-hike. In the five years in between I had logged hundreds of miles in Olympic and Rainier, had hiked 500 miles on the PCT, and done various other long jaunts. Meaning that at the time I stood there listening to the woman I had 3,000 miles logged on America's trails. And I didn't know what a waterbar was.

For all the time I had spent on trails, I really knew next to nothing about them. It never crossed my mind that the ankle-deep water was precisely the culprit guilty for the trenched treadway, and that symbiotically the trenched treadway the culprit for the amount, depth and speed of the water, which in turn was the culprit for exacerbating the erosion that over time could serve to well-near destroy the area. It never crossed my mind that the times I had stepped up out of the trench to walk around the water I was doing my part to form bootleg trails, which in time would collect and channel their own water, and that the many braided trails would undermine the Rhododendron roots, and that inestimable amounts of soil would be ushered away from the area and leave it a shadow of its former self. It never crossed my mind that in time I would swap my sandals for heavy duty leather boots and assess such problems and seek to fix them as a trail worker, likely coming to the conclusion that "we should put some waterbars in there." The only thing I really thought at the time was: "Suck it up. Wet feet are a reality of any distance hike."

The wheels were already in motion for me to gain a more active understanding of a trail. I was scheduled to report to Great Barrington, MA, on May 25 for my first day as a Ridgerunner on the Appalachian Trail, working for the Connecticut Chapter of the AMC to be their eyes and ears in the field. I lived on the trail and reported back any management concerns, including sections of trail that were blown out and needed work. From two summers there my interest was piqued and I moved north to work in the White Mountains for the AMC's fabled professional trail crew. I had found a new passion, or rather my passion for trails had morphed from hiking to trail work. I went on to work for the Randolph Mountain Club, the Green Mountain Club, and Yosemite National Park. I have logged eight seasons of trail work; it has come to define me. So I think back to that woman, and that striking concept of drainage, and I see it as a turning point.

My perspective on the trail, on trails, has changed. Once the trail was amongst the woods, amidst the wild, and my mind floated far above the treadway and through the mountains. The trail barely existed for me as a hiker. Like we blink hundreds of times a day but scarcely notice, so I walked hundreds of miles and scarcely noticed the trail. The trail was the screenwriter, the director, the set, and I was suspending my disbelief. Having been lined out on a trail crew, with eight of us within a hundred yards, all hunched over in the mud, swinging picks, thrusting shovels, moving earth, rolling rock, and spending weeks working on one small section of trail, it is now impossible to suspend my disbelief. The trail is a structure, an edifice, a societal construct; the Appalachian Trail more akin to Route 66 and the Golden Gate Bridge than it is to the untamed frontier or a primal wilderness experience.

But before you cry buzzkill and run to Thoreau, let me assure you that my experiences building these structures have only enriched my perspective on wilderness. My time building them has enhanced the

feelings of quietude and solace that we seek when we shoulder a pack and set out into the woods. No façade has come crashing down; no dream has died in the making of this essay. Rather, knowing the love and work that has built these vast networks assures me that we the people have our priorities straight. So in that sense, hiking any trail, even if I am alone and see no one for weeks, is a communal experience with those who planned the trail, secured funding, cut, blazed and walked it. The trail becomes a symbol of how we can develop lightly, of how we recognize the natural structure and order of the woods and give it a subtle nod and let it do the talking. To know how waterbars slow down water, divert it from the trail, prevent erosion, and preserve the environment we cherish is to know that environment more intimately, is to understand relationships between water and soil, rocks and trees, humankind and wilderness. To work, for a day or six months, clipping brush or installing retaining wall, is to take part in this relationship.

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Hiking a trail, as physical as it is, has for me always fostered a mental connection with the wild; but as I think of trail work, I immediately think of a series of strong tactile memories:

I think of brushing back overgrowth, of gathering the clippings of pine and maple into a hefty armful and pushing forward into the woods to distribute them out of sight of the trail. I am thinking of the distinct sensation of having all this brush (you always take an armful too much) jam up on the face as you heave forward through some boughs. Pine needles in the mouth, scratches on the neck and forearms.

I think of mud. Monday I might try to keep the ankle of my boot above the standing water, but surely by Tuesday mud is caked on my work pants at least halfway up the shin. In the first week of a trail worker's career you might see them with their arms hovering out away from their torsos, their hands obviously uncomfortable suspended out a foot from the hip, dripping mud. They are afraid of the mud, wary of the mud, upset with the mud and trying to contain their exposure to it. I felt like it was a baptism of sorts when I first smeared my hand across my shirt, on my hips, and then wiped my brow. In fact I still feel newly born each time I do it.

I think of dust. The whole trail infrastructure behaves differently out west, and when I worked on a crew in Yosemite I was faced with some new sensory experiences, one of which was working on drainages that were fine sand, with clouds of dust swirling in the air around all of us on the crew. In Yosemite's dry environment my hands wore differently, I squinted in the sunshine and dumped sand out of my boot every afternoon.

I think of being on top of Old Speck, cutting the last 100 feet of the Grafton Loop Trail. It was late October, and it had just snowed. This was the end of the season, and it was cold enough to make us all

a little nervous. But all layered up, with a snow-dusted Maine beneath me, I started bow-sawing these small alpine pine trees, two to four inches in diameter, and as the saw got half way through I would apply pressure with my other arm to try to get it to snap, and when it did, it was a rush of pure pungent alpine pine smell, the sap on my gloves. My boots slid around on the fresh snow, my exhale vaporized in front of me.

As I recall these sensations, I also recall those who were around me at those times, my crew. Next to my aching knuckles on the rock bar, while I grunt "holding," Nick is fluidly wielding his rock bar into position to raise the rock higher, his feet gripping at the ground and his quads exerting upwards into his palms pressed against the bar. While my fingers feel for miniscule ridges for traction on the bottom of the rock, Rachel and Ian wait patiently squatted next to me with their own hands ready to roll. I learn how to better swing an axe watching Dwain snap his wrists into the end of his motion, Fithian is trying not to make the dishes dirtier by contact with his hands, Will is tending to a middle finger that was caught between a rock and a rock. Trail work is done by a trail crew.

I think of the eight of us standing and sitting awkwardly cramped under our blue kitchen tarp as it poured. We were the Green Mountain Club's North Long Trail Patrol, and we were up near Jay Peak. Famous for the massive amounts of snow it gets, we all realized that week that Jay experiences massive amounts of precipitation throughout the year. A stream ran through the middle of the kitchen, it was near impossible to keep mud off of anything, it was impossible for any of us to sit or stand comfortably. Our staircases became waterfalls and in most cases our tents became puddles. Our boots remained wet for weeks; our shirts took on a rankness hitherto unsmelled. Somehow, though, we did it, and did it well. No, I wouldn't say we enjoyed it. In fact, it is precisely those moments on trail crews where everything sucked that I remember most fondly. Where it was cold, the work was tedious, the tools were breaking, the clothes were ripping, the tents were leaking, the knees were tweaking, the knuckles were seizing, and the trail crew was complaining. The complaints would be funny, would be the testimony of someone's hardship and their vow that despite the ridiculousness of the situation they were going to remain true to the group and were actually committed to putting out a level of intensity that was designed to straight outshine all the distraction and all the hassle. These were the times when we started to really get to know each other, when laughter started deeper and more spontaneously, and when the working got ferocious.

There is nothing like it, nothing like the swell of pride, the pulse of intensity of a good long day of trail work. You become so astounded with the amount of work the others are doing you can't even fathom to be impressed by yourself. We all hide our struggle and pain as much as we can to project to the group strength, to give back the inspiration that that we are in need of to not slack off. We look to each other. And we see each other working like hell.

It is easy, I guess, to have the viewpoint that carrying as much weight as you absolutely can; that working harder than you ever thought possible just to move a rock from the woods to the trail, in the rain; that camping out in the raw New England climate for five days with only one t-shirt; well it's easy to think this would be undesirable. But for those of us who gravitate towards trail work and make it

past the first two weeks, we are truly proud of our work, we believe in our work. We know we are doing something real in a world full of facsimiles.

We learn how to use the tools, how to use the materials. We go to sleep thinking about how rocks behave and how to swing an axe more efficiently. We often times butt heads exchanging ideas while trying to work as hard and fast as possible. We invest in the work. It is so simple, but for us it is such an anomaly to have work that is holistic, engaging, challenging and entirely rewarding. And as the rhythm of trail crew works into us, as we come back for a few more seasons, having had the winter to think about the perfect rock staircase and the sharpest axe, we start to zoom out a little bit. The first few seasons of trail work are like sweat constantly dripping in your eyes, your energy and motivation seem boundless and all you have to prove is that you can work as hard as anybody. But that work eventually teaches some lessons that merit a step back.

You start to think about the trail. Before it was the mud, it was the people on the crew, it was this @##* rock, it was the 6,000 calorie dinners, the cases of beer on the weekends, the strength, the Limmers wearing nicely, the crew photos, the stories… But for me at least it all started to come back to that simplest 24-inch wide ribbon: the trail. Behind all the sensory up close and personal encounters with nature, behind all the friendships and camaraderie, behind the sterling work ethic, was a footpath. And all the thrashing about that I have done in the woods was all for something so silent and simple. This is not for me entirely philosophical, rather as I have engaged with this work for so many seasons I still strive to be better at it. And so I have learned from my crew leaders and from experience that the trail and the woods don't need to be fought. That struggle was a struggle against myself, it was me learning how to learn. Where I am at now is a place where I strive to be low impact, to not dig craters and spend half the day moving a boulder to force into it but rather to carefully select the right rock, carefully dig the right hole, and put a sort of subtle accentuation to the trail, not a monument to myself. The trail finally takes the foreground.

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The emergence of the bigger picture also has to do with getting a little older. The level of intensity that pro crews work at, particularly in the Eastern non-profit world, is not sustainable for long. So we tend to move through the ranks pretty quickly, from grunt to senior member to crew leader to field supervisor in a few years. As a crew leader you've got to step back and think a little harder about the work. In my first season on a trail crew I wrestled with rocks in the mud, rolled them through the forest and forced them into holes. I madly whacked at trees with my axe and grunted righteously under a 100 pound packboard. It seems fitting to me that my last season of trail work, or at least of seasonal field crews, was leading a Randolph Mountain Club crew above treeline on Lowe's Path, on Mt. Adams in the Presidentials. Rather than doing highly technical rock work or wood work, rather than firing up the chainsaws and rock drills, rather than diving into a mud hole hoping to emerge with some sort of

structure in a few weeks, we evaluated damaged alpine areas where people were choosing multiple paths and implemented subtle-I hesitate to even call some of them structures- features to deter hikers from taking an undesirable route and to sort of herd them onto the proper trail. It was nuanced work, a study in hiker psychology. We would pace sections back and forth trying to determine what was causing hikers to leave the trail. Some "braided" sections were solved by moving a carin that was fifty yards away. Some were solved by one big rock well placed. It was a blessing to be up there in the fall breeze doing as much thinking as working, really contemplating people's relationship to a footpath. Some of the areas required substantial scree walls, but the work we could be the most proud of was the work that would steer hikers without them noticing it. It was a fine final communion with the trail.

"Fine final" sounds good, but really final is a dramatic overstatement. Though I do now have a full time year round desk job, it is in trails. I have come full circle: I now manage the Ridgerunning program I worked for those years ago. I also manage a teen volunteer trail crew program, so I get to hit the trail and work on it pretty regularly. But it will be some time before I put in five eight hour days of trail work again; my trusty layers of flannel are now in semi-retirement; and I can trust my hands will not be brown, calloused, abraded, and covered in duct tape this summer unless some spreadsheets get really out of control.

It is a natural progression. After all now I get to decide where the work will be and I get to train seasonal staff and teach teenagers about trails. And so it is in a sense a higher level of engagement with the trail. But that can't be. How can I get anymore connected than sleeping in my Labonville workpants caked in mud? I know, though, that this is exactly where I need to be, and I embrace the new professional challenges. In fact, I love my job and the stability it allows me. I have my own apartment, and it has furniture in it. But as I have settled in, remnants of the crews and of years of backcountry living have lingered.

I was a little surprised at how much I had to buy for my kitchen. After years of a pot and a spoon all of a sudden my cart at the Stop and Shop was filled with a tea kettle, a cheese grater, a can opener, a corkscrew, and on and on. I forgot, however, a cutting board. So at dinner time my first night in the apartment I scurried around rummaging through bags and boxes for some suitable substitute, not entirely sure I would find one. Then I came across the Frisbee that alternately spent its evenings smacking trees and providing a cutting surface for the Green Mountain Club crew at Jay Peak. What was so striking about the relic was that just as when it was first cut upon, it was not packed in with that use in mind; I packed it into the woods to throw around and I brought it to my apartment as a keepsake. So chopping onions on it again was not only remnant of a place in time, but also of a resourceful mindset unique to that place. It made me feel like not much had changed, which in the middle of my sparsely furnished apartment and in the midst of a relocation paperwork bonanza, was a welcome feeling.

The relocation was stressful. And for the first few weeks I had trouble sleeping. The solution? I stripped the sheets, opened the windows, and slept in my sleeping bag. I have housebroken myself back into sheets and a comforter, but next to my bed, in lieu of curtains, my six-by-eight tarp is draped

over my window. The same tarp that I huddled under in the pounding rain in Georgia now gently flaps in the breeze in my window in Connecticut, helping to stir memories and bring the past into the present.