

# Anchor of the Deep South

By Frank Wright

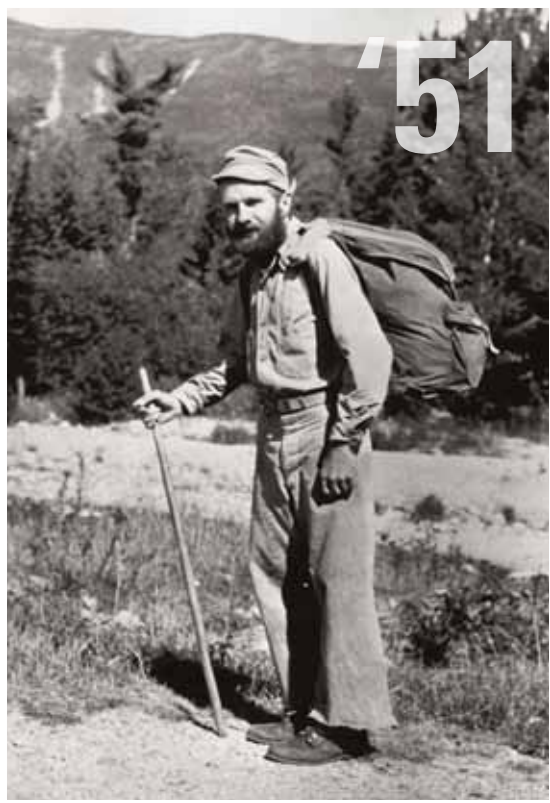
Part two of a two-part series exploring the history of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club. The first part of this feature appears in the December–November issue of A.T. Journeys.

**O**f the many threats to the A.T. in Georgia, road-building has been the most significant and most constant. In 1931, the Forest Service began constructing a road that effectively obliterated the A.T. between Springer Mountain and Gooch Gap. The club spent 30 years off and on to relocate the Trail away from that road.

A “double whammy” hit it in 1961. In a surprise move with no public notice, Congress authorized the Richard B. Russell Parkway in honor of the state’s then very powerful senator—to proceed through Tesnatee and Hogpen gaps and interrupt a 21-mile roadless area. Shortly after its completion in 1967, the club was forced to abandon the shelter in Tesnatee Gap, site of many memorable club outings.

The second threat was even more ominous. The National Park Service (NPS) pushed for legislation to extend the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP) into Georgia from North Carolina. The road would follow the

same track across Georgia that Ozmer and Stone selected and possibly wipe out all but 11 miles of the A.T. GATC and ATC endured many negotiations with parkway officials, trying to suggest alternate routes, to no avail. By 1964, it was apparent the parkway would be built on the crest of the Blue Ridge in Georgia. GATC held fast that, while the NPS might force the Trail relocation, it was a totally unsatisfactory decision with which the club would never agree. Nevertheless, GATC began thinking how to reroute the Trail and over the next 15 years developed a blue-blazed trail from Slaughter Gap to Long Creek Falls that was entered into the *Federal Register* as the “official” A.T. in Georgia. (Part of that route, including a suspension bridge built over the Toccoa River by GATC and USFS in 1977, has become a section of the Benton MacKaye Trail.) In 1968, Congress formally authorized the BRP extension and also passed the National Scenic Trails Act (NSTA) adopting the A.T. as one of the first na-



'51

Gene Espy completes his pioneering thru-hike in 1951.



'61

Richard B. Russell Parkway

PHOTO BY PHILLIP JORDAN

tional scenic trails. The irony was thick enough for GATC to cut with a knife. In one law, Congress purported to save the A.T., while, in another, it would destroy it.

## Wilderness Act

The 1970s brought a silver lining. The Wilderness Act had passed in 1964, and the environmental movement grew stronger. The popularity of outdoor recreation increased by leaps and bounds.

Although the BRP extension was authorized, funding dried up during the Vietnam War. The leadership of GATC and ATC continued to fight the project every step of the way. With growing opposition, the NPS finally relented, and, in 1980, the extension was deauthorized. GATC had a well-earned present for its 50th anniversary. The following year, the path over the crest of the Blue Ridge (the A.T.'s original and current location) was entered into the *Federal Register* as the official route.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, approximately 40 miles of the A.T. in Georgia were incorporated into federal wilderness areas, the longest such stretch along the entire Trail. While that designation may have stopped the extension of Georgia 400 from Atlanta to the North Carolina line through Neels Gap, it did not stop all road-building projects. In 1993, the club was part of a vocal, and successful, opposition to a move to widen U.S. 76 through Dicks Creek Gap. And, in 2005, Congress approved a feasibility study for a new

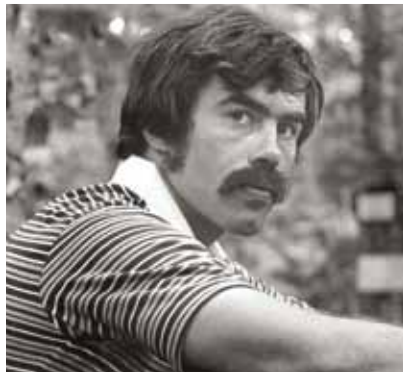
interstate highway, I-3, from Savannah, Georgia, to Knoxville, Tennessee, crossing the A.T. at Dicks Creek Gap (see September/October *A.T. Journeys*). The club anticipates yet another challenge and is prepared to defend its 1930 charter, "to preserve the A.T. as a retreat from civilization."

## Transition to Wilderness

Margaret Drummond, chair of ATC from 1989 to 1995 and a GATC member since 1961, has said that no activity in the club's 75 years has changed more dramatically than trail maintenance. She describes the progress as a transition from "trail work" to "trail maintenance" to "trail management." Avery exhorted GATC in its formative years to pay more than sporadic attention to the Trail, and it is instructive that the GATC trails supervisor did not become an elected office until 1962. It was during Drummond's

**"After the meeting, I introduced myself to the superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway. 'Hi, I'm Margaret Drummond of GATC.' He replied, 'So you're that bulldog of a woman who insists on keeping your trail in the way of my parkway in Georgia.**

**No more fighting!"** —  
*Comments at a 1980 Appalachian National Scenic Trail Advisory Council meeting after the decision to deauthorize the extension of the Blue Ridge Parkway into Georgia.*



**The first ATC \_skills workshop was held on Blood Mountain in 1978 under the tutelage of Bob Proudman.**

# '78

**View of Ravens Cliff Wilderness from Wildcat Mountain.**

PHOTO BY PHILLIP JORDAN

# '80

**During the 1980s and early 1990s, approximately 40 miles of the A.T. in Georgia were incorporated into federal wilderness areas, the longest such stretch along the entire Trail.**

tenure as club president in 1977 that maintenance first became a scheduled monthly activity.

With the passage of amendments to the National Trails System Act in 1978, and the delegation of maintenance and management responsibility by the NPS in 1984 to the ATC and local clubs, GATC took on greater challenges. The first ATC trail-skills workshop was held on Blood Mountain in 1978 under the tutelage of Bob Proudman, today ATC trail-management director but then working for NPS, and Dave Startzell, who had just joined the staff early that year and now serves as executive director.

In the next decade, the club flexed its muscles building bridges, shelters, and privies—tasks previously done primarily by the Forest Service—and became equally adept at drafting cooperative agreements and local management plans. It instituted annual meetings with its principal agency partner, the administration of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, to discuss trail preservation and improvement. In 1996, GATC incorporated the ATC/club Konnarock crew into its yearly maintenance program.

Trail maintenance and trail management continue unabated. GATC and the USFS have a multi-year program to construct a moldering privy adjacent to every shelter in Georgia, with a target completion date of 2007. In another multiyear effort, the club, with Konnarock assistance, is rehabilitating overused campsites along the Trail in Georgia, applying low-impact techniques espoused by Jeff Marion and described in the November/December 2004 issue of *Appalachian Trailway News*. In 2004, its volunteers

contributed more than 12,800 hours of time to the Trail, an average of more than 125 hours for each trail mile maintained.

The 650-member club is also busy recreating. GATC conducts a day hike and/or backpack on each weekend day of the year, except when maintenance is scheduled. Other events include bicycling, canoeing, kayaking, photographic displays, and orientations for prospective members. Mindful of its past, the club last year published *Friendships of the Trail, Volume II*. The two volumes chronicle in detail the first 60 years of the club's rich history.

GATC, midway through its 75th-anniversary year, opened an A.T. interpretive display at Amicalola Falls State Park this spring. Prospective thru-hikers about to embark on their great journeys can view the equipment Gene Espy used in 1951 on his pioneering hike, as well as several other informative displays.

Visitors to Georgia today can see first-hand the progression from an idea in the minds of Stone and Ozmer to what GATC members will proudly tell you is the best-maintained stretch of the whole A.T. Each of the more than 100 overseers who maintains a one-mile section will invariably refer to that mile as “my trail.” The respect and love for the footpath shine through, a reflection of the three-quarter-century tradition of fun-loving, yet fierce members who hike, camp, sing, dance, dig, cut, rake, lop, lift, write, read, monitor, comment, defend, argue, fight, and cooperate—all for “the Trail that leads to faraway places.”

**Frank Wright is a member of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club**

**GATC members learn the joys of crosscut sawing.**



**Rehabilitated campsite**

PHOTO BY OLIN BATCHELOR

