

# Anchor of the Deep South

In a two-part series, *A.T. Journeys* explores the history of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club as it celebrates its 75th anniversary

By Frank Wright

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When the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) came into being in 1925 as the Appalachian Trail Conference, several hiking clubs were established in the northern states, with many miles of developed trails that could be incorporated into Benton Mackaye's proposed ridgeline footpath. In the South, however, a similar foundation was virtually nonexistent. The fledgling Smoky Mountains Hiking Club (SMHC) was the only active club south of Pennsylvania. The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club formed in 1927 and quickly began constructing treadway in Virginia under Myron H. Avery's leadership.

South of Virginia, the route of the trail remained unsettled. MacKaye had originally proposed a terminus at Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, but, in 1925, the Conference chose the western branch of the Blue Ridge, traversing the Great Smokies and ending in the Cohuttas in northwest Georgia. That decision was based solely on a line drawn on a map, without any ground reconnaissance to determine its feasibility.

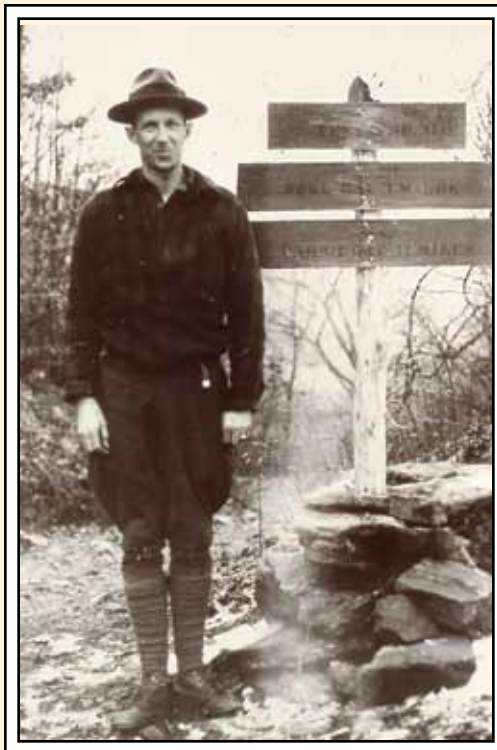
The ATC hired an accomplished woodsman,

Roy Ozmer, to scout southern locations, and, in 1929, he walked from Georgia to Virginia seeking the best route.

In Georgia, he was aided by the assistant state forester, E.B. (Eddie) Stone. Described as quiet, purposeful, and "active as a mouse on store-bought cheese," Stone felt a southern terminus in the Cohuttas was a nonstarter. The Georgia portion would be only 20 miles long and pass over mountains of modest elevation located on private lands, remote from Georgia's population centers. Like Ozmer, he wanted the trail to start at Mt. Oglethorpe, easily

accessible from Atlanta, and follow the eastern branch of the Blue Ridge through national forest lands and over the more imposing crests of Springer, Blood, and Tray mountains into North Carolina.

To get what he wanted, Stone took matters into his own hands. With Ozmer and Stone's assistant, Charlie Elliott, he worked diligently in 1929 to clear and mark his preferred trail. Elliott recounted that Stone dragged him out of bed and carried him through black skies and howling winds "to places where not even the gods would be caught on a



Eddie Stone beside a trail sign.



GATC members prepare to hike Blood Mountain after their organizational meeting in 1930.

# 1930

"Stone said to me, 'I want you to organize the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club.' Just like that. Just like I could go out into the street and round up 50 people who would walk with me up the summit of a mountain. Most of the folks I knew had never seen a mountain."

—Charles Elliott, 1930



# 1931

**A full house at Amicalola Falls Shelter, the first on the A.T. in Georgia, built in 1931.**

day like that.” Stone touted the eastern route to the Conference in early 1930, and Arthur Perkins and Myron Avery, then the leaders at ATC, were flabbergasted to learn that 90 miles of trail in Georgia were waiting to be added to the A.T.

Perkins and Avery wanted to accept this ready-made trail, but one glaring problem arose. Ozmer and Stone proposed that the trail in North Carolina proceed through the Nantahalas and up Forney Ridge to the crest of the Smokies at Siler’s Bald. This was totally unacceptable to the SMHC, which envisioned the trail running the full length of the Smokies ridge-line, south to the Little Tennessee River.

Each faction strongly defended its position to the ATC. In one heated exchange, Ozmer referred to SMHC as “that disgusting Knoxville bunch.” Finally, Horace Kephart, the well-known outdoor writer, suggested a connecting route through the Nantahalas that gave both parties what they desired. At its fourth meeting in May 1930, the ATC amended its constitution to accept the Kephart compromise and adopted Ozmer and Stone’s route through Georgia.

Stone moved quickly to form an organization to support his footpath. He turned to the personable Charlie Elliott to complete this task. Their plan was

to organize chapters in towns adjacent to the A.T., starting with Gainesville. Elliott called a meeting at the Boy Scout hall and secured more than a hundred promises to attend from prospective members. No one showed up. He tried a second time and managed to corral only the janitor of the building.

Chastened, he and Stone changed tactics. They escorted individuals and small groups to the A.T. and “let the trail sell itself.” In a public-relations coup, he arranged for three Boy Scouts to hike the entire trail in Georgia and arrive at Mt Oglethorpe on the day a monument was dedicated to General Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia. The Scouts saluted the flag while shutters clicked. The publicity paid off. Slowly, he and Stone attracted members. Part of the enticement was a membership card announcing the club’s motto: “Ours is a friendship of the trails that lead to faraway places.”

Twenty-five people met to organize on November 1, 1930, at Zimmer’s Mountain Lodge in Dahlonega. Stone, as acting president, defined the twin purposes of the club: “(1) To interest the public in nature and the out-of-doors and to set up congenial companionship between lovers of wild things. (2) To construct, maintain, and tramp the Georgia section

of the Appalachian Trail and preserve it as a retreat from civilization.”

Ozmer, Elliott, and others recounted hiking experiences designed to fuel the interest of the new members. The officers elected for the coming year consisted of a president (Stone), vice-president, secretary-treasurer, and historian (Elliott), as well as the following committees: publicity, photographs, trail signs, equipment and tools, geographical nomenclature, and activity and transportation. A motion was approved to inform Arthur Perkins at the ATC of the organization of the GATC. The meeting adjourned for a hike to Blood Mountain.

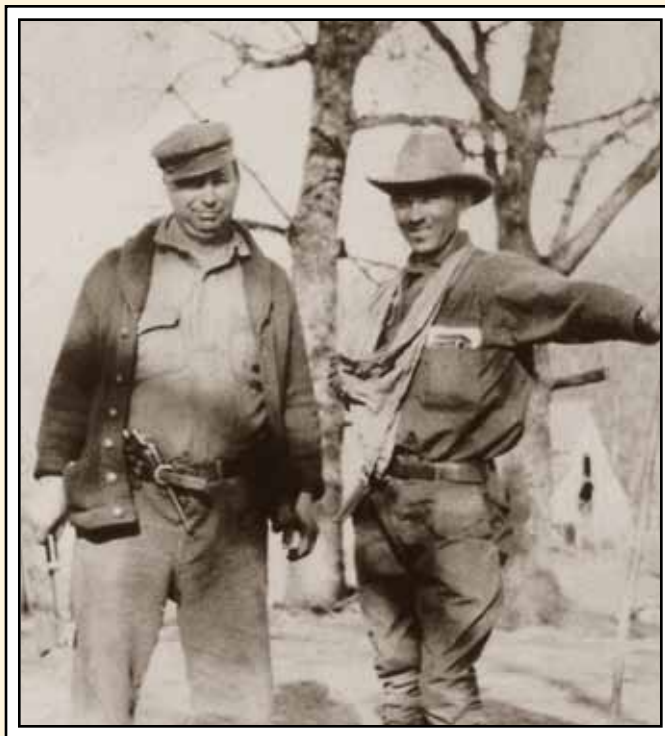
During its first year, Stone worked the sign committee hard. The club mounted metal markers on more than 60 miles of the trail and installed 32 directional signs in gaps and at road crossings. It contracted to have its first shelter built near Amicalola Falls for a grand sum of \$57 (or \$636 in today's dollars).

Warner Hall, a red-headed dynamo possessing keen enthusiasm, high spirit, and good fellowship, was a natural to chair the activities committee. It was said, “Where Warner led, the club frolicked after.” Five hiking outings were organized in 1931, and the events multiplied in 1932, when Hall was elected to the first of his four consecutive terms as president. More than anyone else, Hall personified the unabashed exuberance for the outdoors that became the club's trademark—figuratively and, later, literally.

His outings began with a bus ride that transported 20 to 40 members to a lodge in the mountains. On the curvy, muddy roads, the driver, seeking traction, often called, “All lean to the left,” or “All lean to the right.” At the hotel, the participants enjoyed a community dinner followed by an evening of singing and square-dancing. The hike commenced the next morning, and it was often well after dark when the weary but rejuvenated comrades returned on the bus to Atlanta.

In 1932, club members participated in two events with the SMHC in Tennessee. Any acrimony from the trail-location argument quickly dissipated. GATC and SMHC inaugurated an association for hiking and fellowship that continues to the present as the annual Southern Multi-Club meeting, growing to include all clubs with A.T. responsibilities south of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

Hall, like Elliott, was a superb promoter. In 1934, he came up with the idea of a bronze plaque, to be displayed at Mt. Oglethorpe and highway crossings in Georgia. GATC member G.H. Noble sculpted the plaque, and Hall posed for it. The now familiar silhouette of hiker with pack became the trademark for



**Roy Ozmer (right) with Arthur Woody of the USFS, another local legend.**

GATC, officially registered as the club's exclusive property. The first plaque was installed at Neels Gap, with local newspaper coverage, in May 1934. Two more bronze plaques were struck, and they are located today at Springer Mountain and Unicoi Gap.

Hall sent a picture of the plaque to MacKaye and a plaster cast to Avery. Their responses highlight the differences between the visionary and the trail-builder.

MacKaye called the plaque a “vigorous embodiment of the spirit of the Appalachian Trail.” He characterized its inscription—“A footpath for those who seek fellowship with the wilderness”—as a “masterful definition” of the A.T. MacKaye began a heartfelt association with the kindred spirits of GATC that lasted his lifetime.

Avery's response was more businesslike. “I understand what you seek to accomplish. However, it necessarily brings with it the requirement for intensively marking the route. For it won't help much to lure people on the trail and lose them in half a mile. Paint is the only solution.” For Avery, GATC spent too much time in “congenial companionship” and not nearly enough on trail maintenance. There were frequent reports in the 1930s of lost hikers in Georgia, and he badgered the club constantly to keep the trail blazed.

From its early years, many women members played an active role in GATC. The club bylaws, adopted in 1932, included a provision that the membership never be dominated by either sex. The rule



# 1933

**"Four Foolish Females," hiking in the Nantahalas in 1933, and at the 50th anniversary celebration in 1980 (from left, Cynthia Ward Muise, Marene Snow, Grace Ficken Hawkins, and Olivia Herren Bagwell).**



stayed on the books more than 40 years. A legend developed around "The Four Foolish Females," a group of daring hikers willing to take on any mountain challenge. One of the four, Cynthia Ward, became in 1938 the first of several women GATC presidents. Another, Marene Snow, served continuously as club historian from 1941 to 1964.

The enthusiastic progress of the club came to a halt during World War II. With gasoline rationing and so many members in the armed forces or working to support the war effort, GATC went dormant. After the war, the club was resurrected under the capable leadership of Larry Freeman, who led the effort first to "find" the overgrown trail and then to clear and remark it.

The decade of the 1950s was marked by several singular events. Eugene Espy, from Macon, Georgia, became the second individual and the first Georgian to thru-hike the A.T. His feat received much local publicity and earned him a visit with MacKaye, who said he saw Espy's hike as a fulfillment of his own dream for the footpath. Espy joined GATC and today

is one of a handful of members with more than 50 years of service. Following his lead, 30 more GATC members have become 2,000 milers.

At the same time, logging and chicken farming were encroaching on the portion of the trail traversing private lands from Oglethorpe to Springer Mountain. The situation deteriorated to the point that GATC in 1956 recommended moving the southern terminus to Springer, inside the protective boundaries of the Chatahoochee National Forest. At its 1958 meeting, the ATC made this change official.

In 1959–1961, the Forest Service built or replaced seven shelters. The construction was highlighted by the work of 60 GATC "sherpas" who carried 2,700 pounds of sand, cement, and gravel, plus lumber, to the construction site.

*The conclusion of the GATC 75th anniversary story will appear in the January/February issue of A.T. Journeys.*

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

**"The human mules gathered at Tray Gap and formed into a very effective relay team stretching one-and-a-half miles up to the shelter. Each person was assigned a sector of 150 to 200 paces and relayed load after never-ending load to the next in the chain." –1960 article in the club newsletter, *The Mountaineer***

# 1959