



Unicoi Gap to Tray Mt. and High Shoals

Appalachian Trail Hike—September 1998

By Cody Moran



A fun and adventurous group of hikers huffed & puffed our ways along a strenuous section of North Georgia's Appalachian Trail. This group included Jim Norvill, Scott Harriss, Ralph Fressola Jr., Karen Ritscher, Ellen Miller, Doug Ikelman, Karen and Jim Lakin and their Scottish friend, Calum, and myself.

We met at 8:00am on Saturday morning at the Abernathy MARTA Park n Ride. Once all the expected hikers arrived, we carpooled to Dawsonville for a McBreakfast, and then to Unicoi Gap. After the shuttle was set up and group photos taken, we were off!

Although I was told that part of the trail consisted of climbing Tray Mountain, the second highest point along the Appalachian Trail, I had this vision of easing into it (or up to it). By the time we got started, my motivation and confidence was high and I took to the trail like a bull in a china shop! Boy, was I quickly put in my place! The first segment of the hike was straight up to Rocky Mountain! I became anaerobic so fast, I was gasping. Ellen kept shouting, "Keep drinking water", while I'm thinking, "If I take a drink of water, I'll choke to death"! After a little over a mile of gasping and resting, reaching heat exhaustion, feeling like an unfit idiot, and wondering if I'll make it to the end of the 10.1 miles, I finally got comfortable and began to enjoy the hike. Ellen was a jewel! She supported me through the whole ordeal: "Cody", she shouted, "take deep breaths...use your racewalking techniques & take baby steps" They say there are angels in the Appalachian Mountains to protect the hikers and campers. Ellen was mine!

What a great day! The temperature was in the low 70's, it was a little on the humid side with a slight overcast. Amazingly, the sun would shine and burn away most of the clouds when we were at the points where we could enjoy the vistas.

At the top of Rocky Mountain, we stopped to appreciate the beauty of North Georgia. The group loved telling me that if I thought climbing Rocky Mountain, was tough, wait until we get to Tray Mountain! We descended to Indian Grave Gap where we took our lunch break. After lunch, we continued on the path that led us to Tray Mountain. When we reached the Gap of the 'old cheese factory', we got a good glimpse of what we were about to face...Tray Mountain was towering over us with all of its grandeur. I thought to myself, "Oh, can I do this?!" As we walked on I kept waiting for the big anticipated climb. The next thing I know, we have reached the peak! A piece of cake! Whew!

After a short rest and a few more group photos, we headed back down the mountain. Someone pointed out that they didn't recall seeing the old cheese factory when we came through that area on the way up, so we decided to stop on the way down and see if we could locate the old factory. (Karen Lakin must have been desiring something sweet, because she kept referring to it as the "cheesecake" factory). Well, we couldn't locate the factory, so we continued on to Indian Grave Gap for refreshments and transportation. Scott furnished a whole cooler full of soft drinks, and Karen Lakin tempted us with the most delicious home-made s'mores. They were to die for!

As we were coming out of the thicket and entering the road at Indian Grave Gap, a lone backpacker was resting alongside the trail smoking a cigar. He said he was headed to Tray Mountain to camp out, and after hiking 14 miles so far that day and getting stung ten times by a swarm of bees, he needed a rest. Doug was concerned for the guy getting stung, but the guy said he got a little Benadryl from a ranger. Doug gave him what Benadryl he had, because he wanted to make sure the guy had enough to get him through the next day. The backpacker thanked Doug, and said, "You are my trail angel."

We hopped into our vehicles and headed to High Shoals trail in search of waterfalls. It was a beautiful trail filled with mountain laurel and rhododendron thickets. Since we hadn't had a lot of rain, the waterfalls weren't as forceful as they probably can be, but they were certainly a sight to see!

We went back to our cars, enjoyed more refreshments and ate some more s'mores (and the ones with the will power chose no'mores). Some stayed to camp, others headed back to civilization. I headed straight for the shower, then spent the rest of my Saturday evening on the couch with a bag of peas on my swollen knee.

So, just how bad was it? Will I do it again? IN A HEARTBEAT! I'll see all you fellow "trail angels" in October when the leaves are at their peak!



Front L-R: Karen Ritscher, Scott Harriss, Ranger Bob (The Fuzzy One), Ellen Miller, Karen Lakin, Jim Norvill
Back L-R: Doug Ikelman, Jim Lakin, Cody