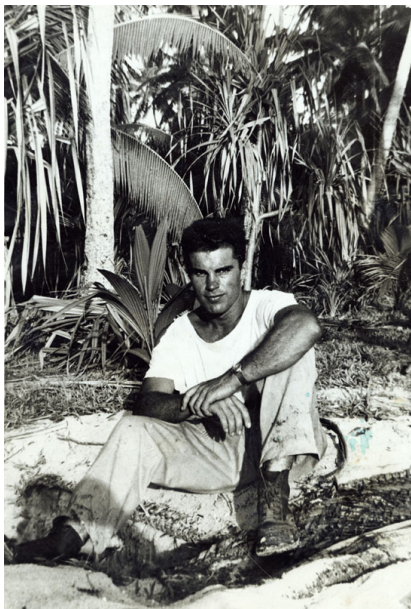


The Famous Thru Hikers of the Appalachian Trail

Hiking the Appalachian Trail has been the aspiration of many people. Most hikers hike the trail in sections, but only a few are able to commit to hiking the whole entire trail in one continuous journey. Of these thru hikers, as they are called, there are several noteworthy hikers. The three mentioned in this article are only a few of the many, but they include hikers who had been told what they were attempting to do was impossible. Earl Shaffer was the first person to ever thru hike the Appalachian Trail, something that was believed to be impossible by the experts at the time. Mike Hanson and Bill Irwin are blind hikers, who undertook the journey and successfully completed it in spite of their disabilities.

Earl Shaffer:

Earl Shaffer, the first ever thru-hiker of the Appalachian Trail was born in 1918. He was raised on a small family farm in rural York, Pennsylvania, twenty miles from the Appalachian Trail¹. Earl was skilled in trapping, fishing and hunting as a result of his youth². In 1941, Earl joined the Army, serving with the Signal Corps in the South Pacific for the next three and a half years¹.



*Earl Shaffer during his World War
II Army service in the Pacific
Islands⁴*

After his discharge in 1945, Earl returned to his home in York, but felt “directionless” as he put it¹. According to his brother, John Shaffer, Earl came across an article in a magazine in 1947 that stated no one had ever hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in one season¹. Earl was motivated to hike the entire trail, not only to “walk the Army out of [his] system”², but also because he had discussed this possibility with a close friend, Walter Winemiller, in the 1930s³. Unfortunately, Walter had been killed at Iwo Jima during the war, so Earl set out to hike the trail alone in 1948.

Earl began his hike in May 1948, starting at Mt. Oglethorpe in Georgia, hiking northbound³.

¹ Hymon

² “Earl Shaffer and the Appalachian Trail”

³ “About Earl Shaffer”

⁴ “Earl Shaffer and the Appalachian Trail”

He carried minimal supplies, even mailing his tent back home after some days, deciding that his poncho could double as shelter⁵. He gave himself the nickname the “Crazy One”⁵. Since experts at the time believed that the Appalachian Trail could not be hiked in one continuous journey, Earl did not have any guidebooks to follow. Earl relied on his compass and common sense to guide him, but often ended taking wrong turns and walking miles off course because the trail had not been maintained well⁵. Much of his hiking consisted of bushwhacking, and this experience later led to his strong activism with the Appalachian Trail and its maintenance.

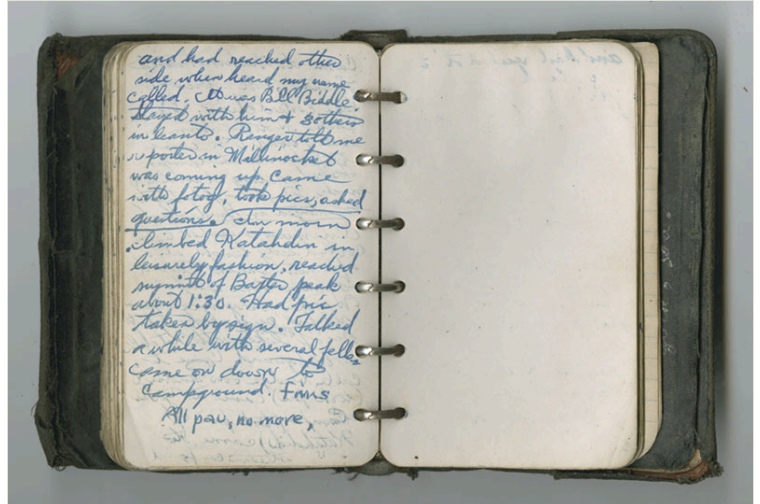
Earl wore one pair of hiking boots on his 2000+ mile journey, without socks. He describes his “foot toughening” technique in his book, *Walking with Spring*: “Since the weather was too cold and footing too rocky to allow walking barefoot, the regular solution, the next best thing was to put sand in my boots and wear no socks until my feet toughened... the Indian ways are usually best in the woods”⁵.



Earl Shaffer's hiking boots⁵

“In morn climbed Katahdin in leisurely fashion, reached summit of Baxter peak about 1:30. Had pic taken by sign. Talked a while with several fellas came on down to campground. finis. All pau, no more. [Hawai’ian expressions meaning “to be finished” or “good night”]”⁶.

Earl also kept a diary with him, and journaled in it almost daily. He also took photographs of his journey, to prove to the skeptics that he had completed his journey. He completed his journey in 124 days, reaching the top of Mt. Katahdin in Maine on August 5th, 1948. His last journal entry is:



Earl's last diary entry⁶

⁵ Martin

⁶ “Earl Shaffer and the Appalachian Trail”



*Earl Shaffer at the top of Mt. Katahdin*⁸

After his first thru-hike, Earl privately published his first book *Walking with Spring*, which was publicly published in 1982⁷. Earl completed a second thru-hike, this time southbound from Mt. Katahdin to Springer Mountain in 1955. During his time off the trail, he worked to advocate the Appalachian Trail's maintenance. Finally, in 1998, Earl completed his third thru-hike of the trail at the age of 79, commemorating the 50th anniversary of his first thru-hike. After this hike, he published his second Appalachian Trail book, *The Appalachian Trail: Calling Me Back to the Hills*⁷.

Earl Shaffer died on May 5th, 2002 at the age of 83 in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, succumbing to cancer^{9, 10}. He was inducted into the first class of the Appalachian Trail's Hall of Fame in June 2011, in recognition for pioneering the concept of thru-hiking the

Appalachian Trail¹¹. Earl Shaffer's actions have inspired thousands more to follow in his footsteps and thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.

⁷ "About Earl Shaffer"

⁸ "Earl Shaffer, the First Reported Thru Hiker"

⁹ "About Earl Shaffer:

¹⁰ Martin

¹¹ O'Brien

Bill Irwin:

Bill Irwin, visually impaired, hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1990 for a total of eight months¹. Irwin was guided by a German shepherd named Orient, who guided him into becoming the first blind man to walk the Appalachian Trail². Born on Aug. 16, 1940 in Birmingham, Alabama, Irwin graduated from Samford University with a bachelor's in biology and chemistry¹. Throughout his life, he experienced a total of five marriages; settling with Debra Messler in 1996, when they moved to Sebec, Maine¹. Irwin was also not blind all his life, as he lost his vision in 1976, when doctors had removed his left eye after having malignant melanoma¹. Because of these devastating series of events, Irwin became an alcoholic and became addicted to smoking cigarettes¹. Irwin wrote for Guideposts Magazine, "When I was a sighted person, I was an alcoholic, a dropout as a husband and father, a guy who lived only for himself. The first clear-eyed thing I had ever done was as a blind man, when I asked God to take charge of my life¹." His purpose of hiking wasn't one to send a message, but one to change himself. Unfortunately, Irwin



Irwin and his guide dog Orient

passed away on Mar. 1, 2014 due to prostate cancer; however, his journey and experience live on².

Irwin's journey began from the southern end of the Appalachian Trail in Springer Mountain, Georgia¹. On Nov. 21, 1990, he reached Maine, reaching the summit of Mt. Katahdin, 5,269 feet above sea level. Along the path, Irwin had made it clear that he had wanted to trek the trail alone, with only Orient by his side. When asked by Steve Huffman of Times News if he had walked with company, Irwin responded, "No, and if someone had tried, I'd have run them off²." He couldn't remember how many times he had fallen on the trail, estimating probably a thousand times.

Irwin suffered from hypothermia and fractured ribs, as he attempted to climb cliffs and mountains². However, despite these predicaments, Irwin surged forward and maintained a positive attitude.

After all the attention gained by his hike, Irwin became a marriage, sex-addiction and family counselor as well as a motivational speaker. He later wrote a memoir, *Blind Courage*, with David McCasland, a hiker who had walked portions of the final parts of the trail^{1,2}.

¹ Cohen

² Huffman

Mike Hanson:

Technology has come a long way, and it has come to the point in which it is used to help the blind hike. Being completely blind from birth, Mike Hanson, a Minneapolis-based attorney, displayed the innovation of technology by using a modified GPS to traverse the Appalachian Trail¹. As a premature infant, doctors had given Hanson a high dose of oxygen, which resulted in damage to his retinas¹. However, even with his visual impairment, Hanson had accomplished plenty in life. He became a president of Capable Partners, which is a program that helped the blind perform activities such as hunting and fishing¹.

His journey began in Georgia on Mar. 6, 2010, and it ended 1,800 miles away on Sept. 18, 2010². Hanson had hiked with Gary Steffens, who, being a filmmaker, had decided to document the trip¹. How Hanson used this special type of GPS is actually very intriguing. At each marked location, Hanson would get notified of his position, distance, and direction to the next checkpoint by just listening to his GPS¹. Every once in a while, Hanson would attend to his GPS so he could verify his position and location. Along the way, he would constantly be using his trekking poles, which alerted him of obstacles and twists in the trail¹. Traveling for 10-12 miles a day, Hanson dealt with many problematic



Hanson on the Appalachian Trail

situations such as storms, snow and ice. He fell 12 times, and luckily, his largest injury was an elbow scrape¹. Carrying 40-50 pounds of weight on his back, Hanson lost a total of 20 pounds on his journey¹. Despite these difficulties, Hanson successfully reached the summit of Mt. Katahdin.

Along the adventure, Hanson had learned a variety of concepts. Hanson quoted, “The trail teaches you a profound respect for the particular situation you’re in. You take a lot of small things for granted, such as being able to get water from a tap¹.” Hanson expressed that being on the trail and away from civilization really does make a person appreciate the many things they have at home, because as a hiker, people don’t always have the luxuries of going to the bathroom or getting water straight from a faucet.

¹ Trankle

² Sarnacki

Contrary to many writers who walk for a living, Hanson walked for a cause; Hanson desired technology to be noticed in the blind community. He quotes: “I made sure to do the really tough parts of the trail to prove a point³.” Hanson not only wanted to prove the advantages of technology to the blind, but he also wanted to change the impact of blind people on society. Employment rates and roles of the blind have not changed ever since technology had its kick-start. “Manufacturers of technology often don’t make it very user friendly,” Hanson states³. He believes that the reason for such constant statistics in employment is due to the fact that visually impaired individuals are unaware of today’s technologies and uneducated on the uses of these newer devices. Recording footage and taking images of the hike, Steffens intended to “change lives” and “open up opportunities” in the visually impaired community with the videos and different types of medias he decided to produce³. Despite being blind, Hanson has written his very own book about this issue, and he is currently in the process of developing new types of technology, especially GPS devices, with a business partner, Harlan Jacobs^{3,4}. Through Wayfinder Angels Corporation, the two business partners are working to raise awareness about technology aids with these products⁴.

³ Sarnacki

⁴ Trankle

More Information:

If you would like to learn about more noteworthy hikers, here are several hikers to search for and several websites to look at:

Hikers:

- Susan Powell (speed hiker)
- Jennifer Pharr Davis (fastest ever assisted thru hike)
- Andrew Thomspen (male fastest assisted thru)
- Matt Kirk (fastest unsupported thru hike)
- Emma “Grandma” Gatewood (1st solo woman ever)
- Scott Rogers (amputee hiker)
- Kevin Gallagher (photographer)

Websites:

- <http://vimeo.com/20218520>
- <http://appalachiantrials.com/thru-hikers-share-how-appalachian-trail-changed-lives/>
- <http://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/photos/10-famous-appalachian-trail-hikers/a-long-walk-in-the>
- <http://appalachiantrials.com/13-appalachian-trail-celebrities/>

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