

Appalachian Trail Odyssey

Although this article isn't specifically about Nelson County, Virginia is the number one state out of fourteen that boasts the greatest number of miles of the trail and I thought it would be of interest to readers because of the physical beauty the trail has to offer & the determined man who hiked it.



A white blaze on a tree shows hikers they are indeed on the Appalachian Trail

He isn't the youngest person on the trail but at sixty years of age, Bob Geiger isn't the oldest, either. Bob is just one of the thousands of hiking enthusiasts who begin walking the Appalachian Trail from late winter to early spring and hopefully, will be one of the twenty percent of thru-hikers who will finish sometime later this summer.

My husband and I were introduced to Bob and his wife Lou Ann over a telephone call from my cousins, Todd and Marian Gainor who live in Alliance, Ohio. Marian's co-worker's husband was hiking the AT and wondered if we would consider hosting him for a night to recoup from the rigors of the trail since our cabin at Love is only about a mile away from Maupin Field Shelter at mile 843 on the trail. We connected and he said he was 100 miles south of us, hiking about 20 miles a day, due to reach us in five days.

Sure enough, Bob came walking up our back field about 11:30 on a very chilly March 29th morning and we hailed him over to the cabin. Slight in stature and thin as a rail, Bob had spent the previous night at the Harper's Creek Shelter and walked up the back face of Three Ridges Mountain before popping out on the Blue Ridge Parkway which adjoins our property.

Once inside, Bob couldn't seem to get close enough to our woodstove and after warming up and devouring a large dinner he began to spin the tale of how he happened to be hiking the 2,189-mile footpath. Bob has been an avid hiker for many years but he said about ten years ago he began entertaining the idea of walking the entire trail. The idea persisted and became serious during the last five years and soon he was planning for the arduous journey. 2021 was his time.

The Appalachian Trail was originally thought up by a Massachusetts forester by the name of Benton MacKaye who envisioned a long-distance hiking trail and proposed its creation in 1921. The construction of the footpath, which stretches 2,189 miles through 14 states, was completed in 1937 although it wasn't until 1948 that Earl Shaffer, a World War II vet, walked the entire length. Up until that time people just hiked the trail in sections.

This year, about 4,000 thru-hikers will start out but of that number, nearly three-quarters of them drop out somewhere along the way. Most people don't really know what they are getting into and fatigue, illness or injury causes them to quit. In earlier years, pack weight was a problem. In 1981 we hosted another AT hiker carrying 60 pounds of equipment. Bob carries around 27 pounds in a soft pack with lighter weight clothing, shoes, tent, sleeping bag and food.



Bob at the start of the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain, Georgia, February 1st

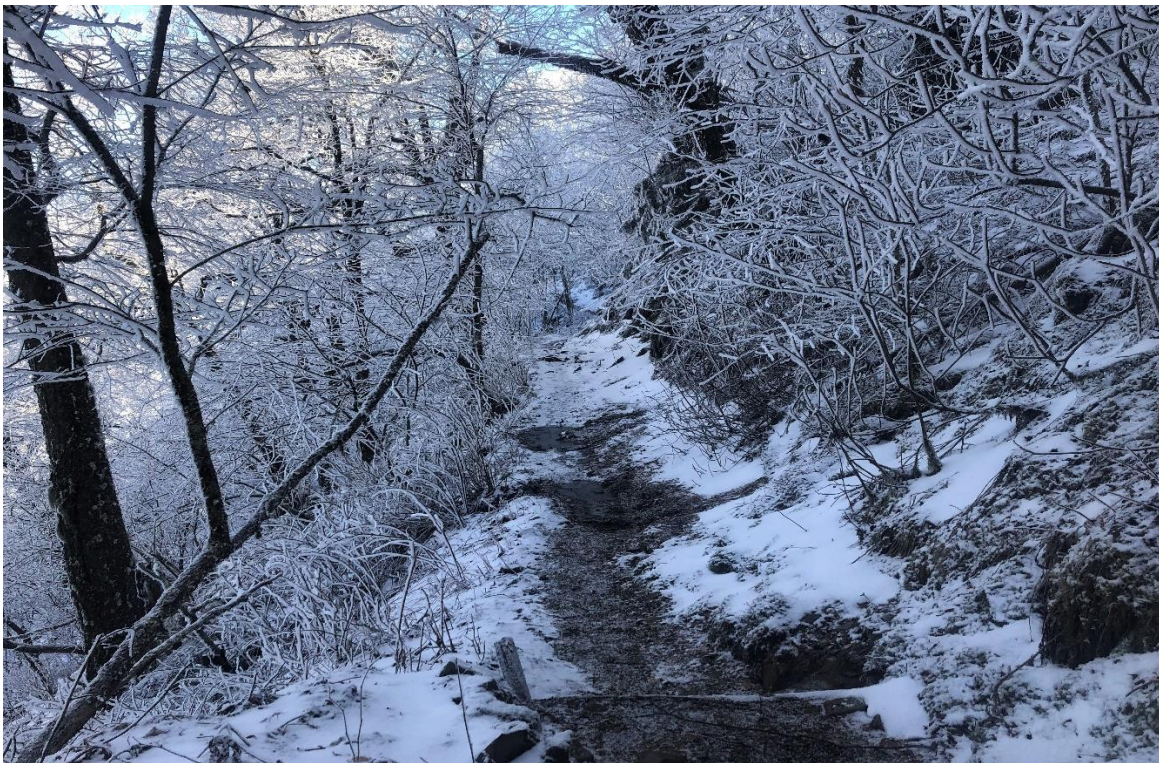


Sunrise over Bob Geiger's tent home



A well-defined Rhododendron lined footpath

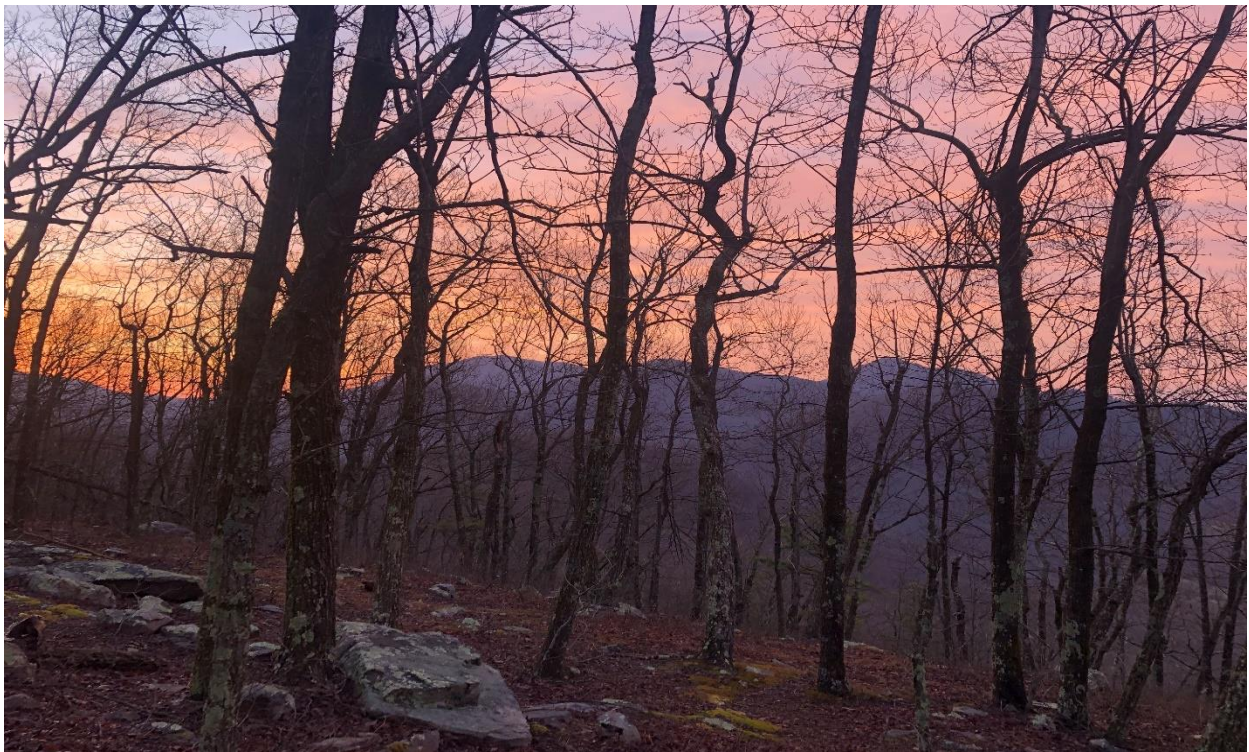
Contrary to popular belief, age is not a requirement; consider Emma Gatewood, a mother of 11 children with 23 grandchildren, at 67 years of age, thru-hiked the entire trail in 1955. Since then, hikers as old as 81 and as young as 5, as well as several blind hikers and an above-the-knee amputee have made the long journey. The southern terminus of the AT begins at Springer Mountain, Georgia (3,780 feet) and ends at the northern terminus, Mount Katahdin, Maine (5,267 feet), and it takes the average thru-hiker between five and six months to complete.



February snow when Bob began his long hike

Bob began his walk from Springer Mountain on February 1st and hopes to reach Mount Katahdin around the end of June, making the arduous trip in five months.

Asked what the best part of the trip was thus far, Bob said it was the people he's met both on the trail and in the towns he's visited. "Everyone is so kind and helpful," he said. Each hiker retains their anonymity by not revealing their given name but a "trail name" they go by. Bob's trail name is "Notsomuch." He states that those choosing to hike the AT do so on a level playing field; "I've met nuclear physicists as well as people fresh from prison and a few solitary girls on the trail." I asked if beautiful scenery was a factor and laughed when Bob told us the only scenery he looked at while walking, was his feet. "You have to be constantly looking down, watching your footing. But I try to make camp each night with a good view, if it's not snowing or foggy. On those nights I just want to eat, climb into my tent and sleep."



The beauty of the Appalachian Trail



The majestic Great Smoky Mountains



Three states down and only eleven more to go!

And the worst part? Bob said he was not prepared emotionally and mentally for how much he missed his family. His wife, Lou Ann, plays a vital part in her husband's safety and well-being by extensive planning to let him know good jumping off places, upcoming shelters, and obstacles along the way. She met Bob in Davenport Gap, Tennessee earlier in the hike and their whole family met again in Waynesboro, Virginia, over Easter weekend. Bob created a special memory for his young granddaughters by carrying out two baskets laden with treats when they met him on trail. Previously they asked him to be on the lookout for the Easter Bunny and with Lou Ann's careful planning, the baskets were delivered to Bob before the grandchildren arrived. I'm sure Bob and his family will always treasure the look on their faces when they saw him coming!

The night before he left our cabin, Bob ate a huge supper, smiling at one point and saying, "This beats the heck out of sitting on a log, eating a granola bar!" After a hot bath and a restful night's sleep, we bid "Notsomuch" Bob goodbye the next morning, taking a final photograph of him standing under the Love Gap sign on the Blue Ridge Parkway and wishing him Godspeed.



Bob leaving Love the morning of March 29, 2021



April 10th at Harper's Ferry: The psychological halfway point on the Appalachian Trail

Bob arrived at Harper's Ferry on April 10th, took a short break and proceeded northward to Maryland and Pennsylvania. He had much to say about the beauty of each state and how he's coped with the rigors of the trail.

"My coldest temperatures were in the Smokies, where I had two days with a low of 13 degrees, and a wind chill of who knows! I knew a February 1st starting date was risking that, and if I were doing it over again, I wouldn't change it. I prefer to hike in 30-50-degree weather. It's easier to layer and get warm than trying to stay cool. I've only had a few days where it's been really hot, and the muggy humidity tires me quicker. It zaps your energy, makes water more of an issue through dry areas, and worst of all, it brings out the bugs. I have dealt with swarms of black flies once I reached Vermont and New Hampshire. If you stop moving you are doomed. They get in your eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. You can't cook or eat without unwanted guests. There's really little relief and I've even used my fashionable bug net more than once. You can't eat while wearing it, but you can at least stay out of your tent.

Wildlife: no bears, venomous snakes or moose yet. The northern most states don't have copperheads and timber rattlesnakes, so that possibility has passed, and I can't say I'm sad about it. I would like to see a (distant) bear, and some hikers around me have, but I'm really crossing

my fingers for a moose. So far, other than the chipmunks, rabbits, and squirrels, it's been 57 deer, 27 turkeys, 1 porcupine, 3 snakes, 1 owl, and 1 beaver. Did you know that porcupines are known to crave salt? I stayed at a shelter in Pennsylvania that had been wrapped in metal, and the wooden steps removed because the wood had absorbed salt over the years of use by sweaty hikers. The porcupines were literally eating the shelter. There is also guidance to make a little noise and check the privy if you use it after dark. Urine contains lots of salt, and you can imagine that there may have been less than perfect aim over the years. If you aren't careful. You may be startled to find the privy already occupied by a salt-craving porcupine! Who knew porcupines also moan, shriek, and squeal? I can tell you firsthand that in the dead of night it is a rather frightening sound.



4/10- Susquehanna River near Duncannon PA



4/15- Near Palmerton, PA; dubbed "Rocksylvania"

"I've hiked mainly by myself. February 1st is not a popular start time, so there weren't many NOBO (northbound) hikers even out here early in my hike. When spring arrived, there are section hikers, flip-floppers, and people who left last year because of Covid who have returned to where they got off, so I've seen, passed, and chatted with lots of hikers, but have only stayed together (hiking the same daily distance) with someone a couple of different times for maybe 3-5 day stretches. I'm ok being by...and with...myself, but there are pros and cons to it. In Vermont I ran into "Rumbles" and "No Filter," two 60-plus hikers, who were a good fit. We hiked together for a few days, but I unfortunately needed to get off the trail for a family memorial service. I was off for six days, so they have logged a pretty good lead. We will see if there is enough time or if circumstances work out so that I catch them in the time left before we get to Mt. Katahdin in Maine.

"I've been surprised that my body has held up as well as it has. I came into this having had knee surgeries, shoulder surgeries, and some disc issues in my neck. I've had a couple of scares, one right after I returned to the trail after being home. The very first day back, I felt a pop in my right knee and a burning sensation. Not good. The knee gave me a few issues for a couple of days, but never escalated into something major. However, don't get me wrong. There are dull aches and sharp pains somewhere every day. My knees and toes don't like the downhill, especially those that are steep and go on for miles. Today's descent was 8 miles long. Luckily

not all of it was steep, but it still gets your knees' attention. My body surprises me, though. I end the day 98% spent. I hobble to my tent and go to bed stiff and sore. But I get up in the morning having recuperated and recovered overnight. It amazes me every time.



Fog blots out views on Mount Everett, just into Massachusetts, May 4th



Very hard day: knees, legs, & ankles feeling it!



In Massachusetts I hiked 20 miles in this, 5/5

This adventure has taught me that thru-hiking is hard. Hard in so many ways.

It is logistically hard. The first logistical issue is getting to and from the start and finish of the trail from your home. Mt. Katahdin is remote! But that's only the start. There are daily logistics; how many miles to hike, where to stop, how rough is the terrain? There are weekly logistics: where do I get off trail to resupply my food, get a shower, and do laundry? How do I get where I decide and need to go? How much daylight do I have? Do I have a timeline that I need to stick to in order to finish by a certain date? What if I need new or different gear?

The weather is hard. Recently I've hiked some very epic sections of the trail in New Hampshire. Franconia Ridge and the Presidential Range are so beautiful. You certainly want good weather so that you get to experience the views, and being exposed on a rocky ridge above tree line for over ten miles is extremely dangerous in heavy rain, high wind, and especially in a thunderstorm. The other extreme is cold temperatures and the risks that come with them. Wet weather, coupled with cool temps and a breeze can put you at risk of hypothermia. You also have dry conditions that affect water sources and the ability to get proper hydration. Dealing with all of these weather-related concerns can also wreak havoc on the carefully planned



logistics we mentioned above.

Trail dangers are hard: There are so many booby traps waiting for you. Damp, moss-covered rocks, roots sticking up or out of the ground just enough to catch the toe of your shoe on or under, wet granite slabs with no place for a handhold or foothold are just asking for you to get hurt. I have only actually fallen twice, which is a miracle, but I have stumbled and tripped thousands and thousands of times. I know of a woman who caught one toe on a root, and when trying to

May 21, near Killington Vermont: getting closer! compensate and catch herself, put her other foot on a slippery rock. She wound up in the hospital needing surgery to repair her newly broken elbow. It can happen to anyone at any time.

Getting enough calories is hard: I have lost about 25 pounds. It happened relatively quickly, and I have been able to plateau there. It's just impossible to eat more than you burn. Food is also heavy, making up the bulk of the weight on your back. You are supposed to look for the highest calories per ounce possible in your food and find yourself eating things you would never eat in the "real world". Protein and carbs are your friend, but you just can't eat enough. "Hiker Hunger" is the term given to the appetites that hikers develop. Town food is what you think about and talk about. For me, ice cream, pizza, burgers, fries, subs, salad, and Dunkin Donuts coffee call my name. My problem has been that my digestive system isn't used to all of that and sometimes my gut struggles to keep up with the type and amount of food that gets consumed when in town.

Physical hiking is hard: Even after my 119 days of hiking, it's still hard. Actually, it continues to get harder instead of easier. I can't imagine how the SOBOs (southbounders) do it. Starting at Katahdin and hiking south puts the toughest part of the trail in front of you right out of the gate. Lots of the trail in New Hampshire (and most likely Maine, too) is very steep. Like, so steep that the trail isn't under your feet, it is directly in front of you. There are large boulder step ups and step downs. The trail takes you over, under, around, and literally through boulders. It can be a hand-over-hand scramble, where your trekking poles are of no use. The amount of elevation gain and loss can make you shake your head and the percentage of incline, or grade, can be HARD!

The mental aspect is hard: I have stayed motivated by the challenge. I can honestly say that I have never had a day where I thought about quitting. The trail hasn't really surprised me. It has really been pretty much exactly what I expected. What makes it hard is that I'm wired to push myself. I play competitive mind games. If it's daylight, I want to continue hiking. Sometimes, that's probably not the best idea for my 60-year-old body, especially



Spring green in Vermont, May 23rd

when the days are the longest of the year. I stop to make calls when I find service, I chat with people I pass or come across, and I probably don't take enough breaks. If I have planned for a certain distance for the day, it is very difficult for me to stop short. If someone tells me I can't or shouldn't, I want to show them that I can and will. Everyone says you should "hike your own hike", and I feel like that's exactly what I'm doing.

Emotions of the hike are hard: I have told people that on a daily basis I feel every emotion I can think of. There is a sense of accomplishment every day. There is something awesome to see every single day. There is a sense of perspective. The trail can make you feel small, but in a good way. It makes you want to do better and to be better. Emotionally, the start in February was harder than I ever believed it would be. Coming back to the trail after the break I took was also hard. I have felt selfish that I'm getting to do this, and sad that I am missing what's going on in the lives of the people at home. I said that I have never had a single day where I wanted to quit and that is the absolute truth. I have loved every minute of the hike, but I can't wait to get back to my family.



Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire



Bob atop Franconia Ridge on May 30th



“However, though all of that hard is smacking you in the face every day, amazingly, it somehow gets lost in the beauty and in the experience. The reward is greater than the risk, the awesome outweighs the aches, the journey is worth the struggle. I am blessed to have made it to Maine. The percentage of hikers that complete an Appalachian Trail thru-hike isn’t great. Some have put it at 20-25%. I have one state left. Just under 300 miles. There is no guarantee, but I am hopeful. I told my daughter that I would tackle the trail just like you eat an elephant...one bite at a time. It’s going to take six days shy of five months (I am hoping to summit on June 24th) to get it all down, but I’ve just about finished it off.

Bob atop Mt. Washington on June 1st with a wind chill factor of 18 degrees



June 1st, Mount Madison: left of “hut” is the trail which is almost vertical



June 4th, View from Wildcat Mountain



June 4th, Leaving the White Mountains

“The Summit”

This portion of Bob’s story is the conclusion of his trail journey as he hikes into Maine



“Moving into Maine was a double edged sword. It was somewhat emotional crossing the border from New Hampshire to Maine. There was a part of me that wanted to breathe a sigh of relief. I had moved into state number 14 of 14, and I felt like I had made it. But, realistically, I knew that there were almost 300 miles left. Most folks believe, including

Newly into Maine on June 6th, and working on the Baldpates me, that southern Maine is the hardest section of the trail. This was also the time, for me, where the weather was the muggiest, and the bugs almost unbearable. But Maine also brought some of the most amazingly beautiful views of the entire trail. Some were from mountain summits after a long, hard climb, like the Baldpates, Old Blue, and the Saddlebacks, and others were at lower elevation as the trail passed Maine’s numerous brooks, streams, and ponds.



June 10th, summit of Saddleback Junior *Sunrise on June 11th, close to the 2000 mile mark*

“Since reaching Vermont, I had hoped to see a moose on the trail. Maine brought me my first sighting on day 126 as I was being shuttled back to the trailhead after a night at the Hostel of Maine in Stratton. A young moose popped out of the woods and trotted down the road in front of the car for about a quarter mile. I took pictures and a video through the car windshield, and was excited, but all I could really see was the long hind legs and the rump! A week later, on day 133, I rounded a corner and came upon a hiker resting on a log beside a pond. He shared there was a moose in the water about 150 yards away. Again I took pictures and a video, and patiently waited, but it never came closer. Good things come to those who wait, because two days later, as Crescent Pond, I came upon my 3rd moose. This one was only about 30 yards away, dipping its head into and out of the water. It looked at me, seemed unimpressed, and continued eating. Then, for icing on the cake, on day 137, right after my wife Lou Ann and daughter Ellie arrived at the Abol Campground in Baxter State Park, a moose walked right past the side of the shelter. This one kept moving so we didn’t get to observe it over a long period of time, but it was fun for me to see one with my family.



3rd of 4 moose seen on trail. June 21st

experience...and are awesome!

“Looking back, there’s very little I would change. My start date of February 1st allowed me to stay ahead of the trail crowd. It also kept me out of the humidity for over three-quarters of the trail, which also eliminated the bugs until then as well. I also stayed out of the “green tunnel” (what they call the trail when in full leaf) as long as possible, maximizing my views. My gear was dialed in well, and performed as expected. No complaints there at all.

“Summiting was exciting and the weather was beautiful. I was relieved that my body had held out and it was definitely telling me that it was ready to finish. Summit Day, June 24, would have been my mother-in-law’s 86th birthday, and I know she was hooting and hollering in celebration, happy for me and the successful completion of the journey. I will miss waking up every morning, and anticipating what’s in store, knowing there will be places to go and things to see that few get to



June 24th. Summit day dawns at 4:48 am. The Geiger family had been on the trail since 4:13 am.



June 24, 7:37 am. The vertical rockface of Katahdin

our starting point about 12 hours later. I thought it was *brutal*. Ellie thought it was *hard*. And Bob thought it was *fun*! I know we slowed him down tons, but he was more than patient with us. Pictured below are a few photos that wrapped up the big adventure.”

Bob’s wife Lou Ann and daughter Ellie joined him and camped at the base of Katahdin the night before they all climbed to the summit on June 24th. In her own words, Lou Ann describes the final ascent up Mount Katahdin: “I’m here to tell you that I won’t be doing THAT again anytime soon! We took our first steps on the trail at 4:13 am and after spending some time at the summit, returned to



Ellie, Bob, and Lou Ann. “The only proof that I was actually there!”

Good Luck Charm Did It's Job!



Bob holding the good luck charm from his granddaughters, Elin and Ensley, at the start of his hike on February 1, 2021, at the southern terminus of Springer Mountain, Georgia, and on June 24 at the northern terminus at Mount Katahdin, Maine. Notice Bob's weight... he is 25 pounds lighter and sports a mustache and beard at the end of his Appalachian Trail Odyssey.

AT Fact: Although the Katahdin sign says the distance from Springer Mt., Georgia is 2,189.1 miles, Bob said each year that distance can change due to various circumstances. In his 2021 hike, the total distance recorded came in at 2,193.1 miles, another four miles over the average.

BAM!!! BOOM!!! DONE!!!



Bob “Notsomuch” Geiger at the end of his 2,189 mile Appalachian Trail Journey

Things I Learned Walking the AT

Your body is capable of more than you think. Your body can recover more quickly than you think. I confirmed that I can be driven (although I don't believe I sacrificed “smelling the roses”). I had a harder time dealing with being away from my family than I expected. There is beauty in all of nature and it is not to be taken for granted. There is something spiritual about the trail. I think this was especially heightened because I was hiking mostly solo. The trail makes you want to be a better person. I can't pick favorites (state, section, views). My favorite is the totality, the experience, the journey. People of all walks of life are equalized by the trail. There were many people who were selfless, kind, and willing to support my hike and I hope to pay forward their generosity.

I Also Learned...

Pay Day candy bars are delicious. I never had the pleasure of eating one in my 60 years. A beard is not for me. It was patchy and wiry and was a magnet for cobwebs (and their dead bugs), as well as collecting all kinds of food samples. I can eat Clif Bars every day and not tire of them. The opposite is true for jerky. Lasagna is my favorite Mountain House dehydrated meal, followed closely by spaghetti. It's fun to be able to eat whatever you want in town. Ice Cream and Dunkin Donut coffee were my constant cravings!