

High Adventure on the Great Eastern Trail

March 12, 2013

Another historic day has come and gone in Elkhorn City, KY. The world renowned “Hillbilly Bart and Someday Jo Show” arrived safe and sound at the northern terminus of the Pine Mountain State Scenic Trail section of the Great Eastern Trail on March 11, 2013. I must say this show was spectacular! Definitely the best show in town, any town!

In case you are wondering what the “Hillbilly Bart and Someday Jo Show” is all about. It’s all about the Great Eastern Trail (GET) and its first two thru-hikers, Joanna Swanson a.k.a. “Someday” from Minnesota and Bart Houck a.k.a. “Hillbilly Bart” from West Virginia.

Like truck drivers, long- distance hikers have a “trail handle”. Unlike truck drivers, long-distance hikers are on a much slower pace and they carry their cargo (25-45 lbs) on their backs. Bart and Jo began their epic journey in January on the southern end of the trail in Alabama and expect to be in New York’s Finger Lakes region sometime in May or June at the northern end.

The Great Eastern Trail (GET) is America’s newest long-distance hiking trail which is 1800 miles long and crosses nine states. Originally called the Western Appalachian Alternative, it was conceived by Earl Shaffer, the first Appalachian Trail thru-hiker. The Great Eastern Trail (GET) provides a premier hiking experience on a series of existing trails that are being linked to each other into a long-distance footpath in the Appalachian Mountains stretching from Alabama to the Finger Lakes Trail in New York.

Kentucky’s newest state park, the Pine Mountain State Scenic Trail is now officially part of the GET system and this is good news for Pike County. The Pine Mountain/Russell Fork River Corridor of Pike County Kentucky is quickly becoming an international destination for high-end eco-tourism activities. Undoubtedly, areas of Pike County such as Elkhorn City are poised to reap the benefits of this potential adventure recreation industry.

For example, in 1972 the Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) established an outdoor recreation company located at the intersection of the Appalachian Trail and the Nantahala River in rural Swain County, North Carolina, that has proven to be a shining success story. Originally a roadside inn, the company has evolved into one of the largest recreation companies in the nation and one of western Carolina’s largest employers. In 2010, NOC contributed \$85,386,489 to the local economy while providing a total of 1,061 jobs. Another successful eco-tourism example is nearby Damascus, Virginia where 20,000 people hike into town for the annual “Trail Days” celebration.

I certainly think good things are on the horizon for communities that invest in eco-tourism but not all the benefits will be from financial gain, as I was privileged to witness Monday evening when I met “Hillbilly Bart” and “Someday” at the Pine Mountain Trailhead in Elkhorn City. This marked the beginning of “The Hillbilly Bart and Someday Jo Show” and I was fortunate enough to have the honor of rendezvousing with them at the Pine Mountain Trailhead and even more fortunate when they agreed to

use my garage apartment, for a night of well deserved rest off the trail. "Someday" and "Hillbilly" were glad to get a solid roof over their heads (instead of nylon) and a hot shower. As for me, I was proud as a peacock to share my humble home with these celebrities. It was great to share their experiences over dinner at the Rusty Fork Café and again over my own, world famous oatmeal the following morning.

I'm not sure who receives the most enjoyment on this type of journey... the backpackers or local folks like myself, whom they meet along the way. When I met "Sometime" and "Hillbilly Bart" Monday evening I essentially became part of their journey. I became a team member and began to feel their excitement, their anticipation of what lies ahead, the dread of an approaching storm and the joy of finding out they have reached a safe campsite for the night.

This experience has made me think of the true advantages of living in a "trail town" or a "river town". Throughout the ages humans have followed trails and rivers to advance trade... and trade advances prosperity and culture. So, just living near a river or a trail exposes us to new people, with new ideas that will enhance our knowledge and quality of life through diversity.

This exchange of humanity is equally experienced by our visitors hiking the trail as well. This is described by Debra Smith in her book, "Great Stories of Hiking the Appalachian Trail". She says "It might even be called a journey in human relationships and fantastic hospitality, with walking secondary. Folks we met along the way boosted our morale. Their faith in us, that we would achieve our goal and their help in making it possible could not have been greater. In this day of hate and violence it is refreshing to meet human beings who exemplify love for their fellowman."

As Jo and Bart are approaching mile 700 on their 1,800 mile (4-5 month) trek from Alabama to New York on the newly developed Great Eastern Trail, I have no doubt they will arrive in New York with smiling faces, a few blisters and a pocket-full of Smarties. I've learned that Smarties and Moon Pies are like some-kind-of redneck Power Bar for thru-hikers. I would have never known!

If these folks stop in your town don't miss the show. It's certainly worth the price of admission...just for the nutritional info alone. Seriously, if you are fortunate enough to encounter these adventurers on their journey, offer your assistance and what you will receive in return will stick with you forever.

In conclusion, I am happy to report that I returned "Hillbilly Bart" and "Someday" to the trailhead where I found them this morning and they are now on their merry way to Matewan, West Virginia with great enthusiasm and spirit, along with "Hillbilly's" bum ankle and "Someday's" blistered foot. My advice...don't bet against these guys. Personally, I'm betting the bank that the famous "Hillbilly Bart and Someday Jo Show" will be playing at a campsite somewhere in New York soon!!!

To join in the fun and follow the adventures of "Hillbilly Bart" and "Someday" on their way to New York visit their website at www.gethiking.net. Go, Go, Go Bart and Jo.

Submitted by James Stapleton

The author is a member of the Board of Directors of the Pine Mountain State Scenic Trail and currently living the dream in Elkhorn City, Kentucky.