

Baby Steps on the Giant Trail

5 - July 20-31, 1994

"I'll see you in about six hours!" I hang up the phone, ending this conversation with Marie. Then putting the dog dishes and the dog into the car, we roll eastward. The rest of the gear is packed... in boxes or in Shamu. We are really and truly going to take a long enough trip to test our independence. We will start at the New York/ Pennsylvania border and walk south along the NCT through the Allegheny National Forest for about 100 miles. David, having completed his freshman year in college, has decided to join his mom and me.

The hours in the car give me plenty of time to think and there is plenty to think about. The past few years have been ones of swift changes in my life. It feels as if I am moving into a new lifetime. My husband has taken a new job working with test tubes and chemicals after 24 years of working with people. The boys are grown and finding their own ways through life. The youngest, Steve, has completed his sophomore year in college. I had invited him to join us, like Dave, but was not surprised at the negative response. No hiker, he. "You're weird, Mom," he always says.

"Thank you, it's one of my better qualities!" I always retort.

I am finishing my second year in the Environmental Engineering program at the University of Michigan, headed for a Master's Degree. I only get home for holidays or an occasional long weekend. Omer is accepting of this arrangement, but eager for me to finish. We have built a new house on our property. We have said a sad farewell to our 100-year-old home, which turned into a pile of rubble while being moved. It feels like everything I own is packed in a box somewhere; things from our old house, things from my mother's house, things I have brought to Ann Arbor. Sometimes I don't know where home is, except maybe in my car. And that is where I am now, with more things in boxes, and with a wonderful friend who will also have the chance to test his endurance.

That friend is Chips, whom I am determined to train to be a good camping dog. Chips is 35 pounds of mixed-heritage assets and liabilities, but he looks like a mini-golden retriever. My mind wanders again to last spring when I had to say good-bye to a key player of that "previous life." My old dog, Hezekiah, at fourteen could see or hear little. He was incontinent, and could hardly walk. We joked that he looked like a drunken semi-truck driver who could manage the cab but didn't have a clue as to what his trailer was doing. Omer had patiently cared for him while I was away at school. But I had to make that most difficult of decisions, to put Hezekiah to sleep. Heze (HEH-zee) had

been born on a hand-braided rag rug in our kitchen, with our two youngest boys watching in wonder. He earned the reputation over the years for being the dumbest, but funniest dog we ever owned. He was 65 pounds of hilarious, rock-stupid mutt. He looked something like a white short-haired German Shepherd with black spots and ears that flopped at the tips... except when he looked like a fuzzy pig, or a sheep, or a bat... Well, you get the idea. When I started renewing my camping skills I tried to teach Heze to go with me. One incident explains the result of this experiment pretty well.

Hezekiah and I had carried the camping equipment just over the hill onto the back section of our five-acre lot. This was just to be an overnight, with no trips to the house allowed, to make sure that I was including all essential gear. If we passed this test, I would next plan for a weekend outing. All went well. I cooked dinner, boiled water, set up my pup tent, and enjoyed the evening. At dark I crawled in the tent and zipped Heze and myself in, away from the mosquitoes. This may have been a pup tent, but my "pup" certainly wasn't used to such sleeping quarters. He insisted on sleeping on the bottom half of my sleeping bag. He woofed at every night noise, and tried to poke his nose through the mosquito netting. I tried closing the flaps so that he couldn't see out, I tried tying the flaps back so that he could see out. We finally settled on leaving the bottom of the zipper open so that he could sleep with his head poked outside. After several restless hours of attempting to appease both the dog and the god of ideal camping, I fell into a deep sleep.

Some time later I became semi-conscious and discovered that I was unable to move. It was dark, very dark, too dark somehow. Why couldn't I move? I concluded with a fuzzy brain that the dog must be on top of me. "Move, Heze," I muttered, giving the bulk above me a shove. Nothing. "Get off!" Nothing, maybe a wiggle. I pushed, and tried to roll him off. Why couldn't I seem to move properly? This is nuts; I still couldn't see anything either. Usually this white dog is readily visible except on the blackest of nights. I shoved harder, and with a dog-voiced "oof" the weight slid off my body. But I still couldn't freely move my arms and legs, although there seemed to be nothing wrong with them. Slowly I regained full consciousness and began to realize that Hezekiah, now treading heavily on me, trying to re-settle himself on this wonderful warm spot in the chilly night, was separated from me by layers of maroon nylon. "This dumb dog is outside the tent," I said to no one in particular. More shoving and struggling and I finally extricated myself from the sleeping bag and tangled tent. Heze smiled happily at me. He had collapsed the poles, and found everything he wanted, an unimpeded view of the world and a warm spot to stretch out and rest.

The old dog and I camped a few more times together, but he never did get it quite right. Hezekiah is now gone, and gone with him what felt like one of the last connections to my former self. Heze may

have been dumb and funny, but he was also the most empathetic dog I ever owned. He had jumped and celebrated at all the victories and joys of three sons. He had cried with me as I agonized over the boys' poor decisions, growing pains, and other sorrows of life. His tongue was the softest and smoothest of any dog's I've ever known and he would lick the tears carefully from my face and gaze into my eyes with near-human sympathy. Then he would sigh and stretch his long frame against mine, patiently comforting. "I'm here for you," he always seemed to say.

Chips is off to a much better start at camping skills. He is one-year-old wild, but at least he is intelligent.

"Ie-ee-ee-ee!" I am jerked from my reverie. What is that in the road ahead? It is nearing midnight and I have turned off route 17 to enter the town of Allegany, New York. Some long-spindly human form is jumping and flapping around in the street ahead of me. A drunk? He's running at the side of my car! Can I avoid him? He's trying to grab the door! Oh! It's only David (you can stop hammering now, heart), making sure that I don't miss the turn to St. Bonaventure's where we are to meet. Marie's aunt lives here, a retirement home for nuns. Early next morning we attend mass in the red-marble, ornately painted and gilded chapel. This is all strange enough to Protestant me to seem mystical and old-world; a sense of praise with hushed awe pervades. Breakfast is the counterpoint— sharing hearty bowls of steaming oatmeal with the nuns, who wear simple and practical brown dresses, laughing and chatting casually in contrast to the formal worship setting.

Next stop, Sheffield, Pennsylvania. Don and Brita Dorn live near the center of the Allegheny National Forest in a crossroads town. They have agreed to help us place a cache box of supplies with a family near the mid-point of the trail. Their home is a lovely colonial building on a corner lot with a white picket fence. Don, a retired forest ranger, gives us ecological previews of the forest trail. Brita gives us slices of homemade pie. Both gifts are welcome. We leave our cache box with a family only a half mile off the actual trail, and then return to Dorns'. We know that we have everything that we need with us, but it is not distributed in the three packs. This job takes most of the afternoon and all of their porch. We sort and weigh, and adjust and give all the extras to Dave. Having a teenage fellow along who hardly



Dave & Marie sign a trail register

notices 50 pounds on his back is a great idea! Before dark a car is stashed at each end of the Forest, and we spend the night at Willow Bay campsite. In the morning we walk north to the New York State border and backtrack to the trailhead to ensure that we hike all the Forest miles. Now for the reality check— we must shoulder the packs, sever the vehicular umbilical cord which ties the day hiker to the placental resources of city and store, and be born as backpackers.

Our first few days together are a shakedown for all of us. Marie's pack with new hipbelt and straps is pressing painfully on a nerve. She is annoyed that I seem unconcerned, while I blithely assume that she will get it adjusted. I have always packed Shamu just so... everything in its perfect compartment. Marie points out that we need to pack differently to make camp set-up faster. I am offended. Dave and I had each assumed that we would be the one navigating us with the map and guide. He doesn't like the way I check it less than continuously, and I think that he is TOO presumptuous to want the map. This is MY hike. Marie is a morning person, frustrated by my slow wake-ups. I am a night person, irked by her terse fumbling in the evening. Ah, yes, backpacking is not for the inflexible. Friendship of long-standing wins out and conflicts are eventually resolved. Marie is right, packing differently makes much more sense. Perhaps the fact that Marie and I function better at different times of the day can be an asset to the group efficiency. Dave and I agree to be navigator on alternate days (after a tense exchange covering what we do not like about each other's map-reading style). No modest victory, this; two only children apparently can learn to share! These are the moments that are not chemically preserved in our bright photos of Great Spangled (orange) Fritillaries on purple Heal-All, sparkly sun on Johnnycake Run, or Tracy Ridge rising steeply from the level of Allegheny Reservoir. But such moments of contention and compromise must also be remembered and their lessons internalized.

The other member of our gang, Chips, is unaffected by all the tensions around him. He is ecstatic, racing from one exotic smell to the next, sampling them all. His dog-mind is a tangle of experiential riches. Bound after that chipmunk ("where do those shifty fellows disappear to?"). Check out this log ("don't know what's marked this spot; file it for reference"). Time for a pat on the head ("yup, the humans approve my reconnaissance plan"). Poke nose under these leaves ("snff-fff, musty leaves mean salamanders"). Lap at a rocky trickle ("sure am thirsty, but this oak-leaf tea is pretty great"). Run ahead to find David ("got to keep these people herded properly, they might get lost without me"). The commentary at a level three feet above Chips' brain runs more like, "That crazy pup must be running five miles for every one we walk."

On the third day out we take a half-day off, and for once our timing is impeccable. It rains all afternoon, and we laze in the tents,

cozy and dry with books and maps and each other for company. Chips is nearly comatose. He had "crashed" under a fern when we reached this site, and moved slowly to the tent to join us when the rain began. For the rest of this hike, and ever after, he has paced himself to the rigors of trail life. He still has to occasionally rip



Chips rests in the ferns

through the leaves after some real or imagined exciting smell; he still tries to keep his humans herded up tighter than they usually are, but he generally trots sensibly along the trail. Now he probably walks only a bit more than we do. "Since Chips has four legs, does that mean he's walked twice the distance you have?" a friend would later ask me. I hope he was making a joke.



Bears. I have yet to meet one on the trail, and that's just fine with me; I have friends who have met them and this is one adventure that I am content to experience vicariously. Supposedly there are bears in this Forest so we must cache our food each night to keep it safe. Well, that's the theory. If any bears really wanted our dinners, I suspect they would have had them. According to the backpacking guides what we really needed each night was a cliff. Two cliffs, at least 20 feet apart, with sheer walls, with one of our party placed strategically on each side. Then we simply had to string a cable from one wall to the other, and hang the cache bag in the middle. Right. Given the cliffs, in between the time needed to do and undo our cache we could hike a mile or so each day (staying near the cliffs), maybe even find time to eat some of our carefully hoarded food.

Option two. Climb at least 20 feet up two trees with no lower branches which are at least 20 feet apart. Tie a stout rope between them, and suspend the cache bag in the middle of this. "Oh, Dave," we implore sweetly. Our site the first night has politely provided such trees. Dave shinnies up a rough bole with the rope clenched in his teeth, as we watch. "Is this high enough?" We agree, and he ties off the first end and descends to earth. Not bad, this has taken only ten minutes. On to the second tree. Marie and I are beginning to be bored with watching Dave grunt and heave himself up trees, and even our energetic teen is losing his enthusiasm. After another twenty minutes or so the second end of the rope is tied. "I'm not sure I can do this every night," he casually comments while collapsing at our feet and spitting bark fragments from between his teeth. Now we only have to suspend all food and toiletries in the middle, at least 8 feet from any side branches, and

at least 12-15 feet from the ground. This means ransacking the packs for every article of such description. So much for each person carrying his/her own things. If we must do this every night the cache-requiring items will need to be kept together. Another quarter-hour and we have a nylon stuff sack, lined with a plastic bag, filled with all bear delicacies. It's less than clear how much the plastic liner will prevent our bear from smelling this wonderful offering since she can easily open even tin cans whenever she so desires. We tie another rope to the cache bag and hoist it to the middle of our horizontal line. One hour has now passed. The bag swings a happy two feet above the forest floor. Maybe we've saved our food from an uninterested chipmunk. We give up for tonight. At least the delicious items are out of the tents. Except for us.

Act two. Tonight we look for just one tree, and divide our food into two bags. We find a maple whose top bends to one side, and tie the heavier bag securely to our rope. After a dozen tries we manage to throw the other, weighted end over the curved trunk, at what we judge to be the best location. Tonight's lesson is: do not tie a rock in the end of the rope for a weight, no matter how many books confidently suggest such a plan. Gravity works, and the rocks occasionally fall out of their rope cages, bent on redesigning our heads. We'd rather not, thank you. Few rocks come with grooves to hold the rope in place. We are not enchanted with the idea of taking a day off for a participatory stone-age history lesson on rock shaping, to learn how our ancestors accomplished such tasks. Besides, we would then feel obliged to carry our carefully prepared rock whose status would be elevated to implement. This runs counter to the backpacker's credo to reduce the load. A stout, short piece of stick turns out to be the best weight; the rope is tied to the middle with a clove hitch. This creates a T-handle to grab and pull the rope once it's over the branch. We hoist the first bag as high as we can, tie the second bag to the free end, and push it upwards to counterbalance the first bag. Wow! We did it, and in only thirty minutes. Tonight our bags are safe from chipmunks and clumsy squirrels! Well, hey, it's an improvement. "Are you enjoying the show, all you bears who hold tickets to this event?" Hopefully we are so hilarious to watch that you will spare the cache just to see what Act III will be.

Maybe in bear country hikers should eat all their food the first night, and skip this cache comedy. However, we do become better and faster at finding and choosing trees, appropriate heights and diameters of horizontal branches. "Is there a cache tree?" becomes a key question in choosing a campsite. We actually succeed, some nights, in getting the bags high over our heads and several feet from the tree trunk. We are either lucky, there are no bears nearby, or the show continues to be too amusing to eat; the bears never sampled our Baco-spuds or Crest. It seems to me that what is really required to be bear-proof is a skyhook or a guardian angel. I'll take the angel. Ours seems to be on duty.



Crossing creeks we often stub our toes on chunks of Pennsylvanian sea. That is "Pennsylvanian" as in 300 million years ago. Now the seas are the Pennsylvanian hills. This makes the wading more treacherous. Red and yellow sandstone do not belong only in the Painted Desert, so it seems. My guidebook informs me that the floor of the inland sandy sea settled and then rose without wrinkling to form a plateau. Rivers with rocky teeth sawed the plateau into tiles in high relief which were then rounded into the pointed knobs we now call the foothills of the Appalachians. The sea floor was above the present tops of the peaks. We are stepping carefully along the edge of the Allegheny Reservoir, through pre-history, at the bottom of the bottom of the sea-floor, seeing things already hidden from the Brachiopod's gaze. The bottom of his kingdom ended 800 feet above us. We live after him, and walk through a sandy world formed before he hatched. The guidebook does not warn us to watch out for the Pennsylvanian Dragonflies with the 30-inch wingspans. Would it be so incredible to see one, here on our journey through the ancient past?

Interspersed with the sandstone is a rock with the descriptive but unromantic name, conglomerate. This is shale with pebbles of gray or pink or white quartz embedded like tapioca pearls in a chocolate pudding. When I was small and found my first such rock I showed it to an adult, and asked what kind it was. I was told, "it's conglomerate." Serious child that I was, I stamped my foot and replied, "I can see that, but what is its name?"

Most of the sandstone and conglomerate which we must deal with on this humid July day is still cemented neatly into a conical hill in front of us. Not that we can actually get a perspective on the hill from where we stand. At this point it's just trees and trail heading upwards from Chappel Bay, at 1328 feet, to reach the high point of the Kinzua Watershed at 2110 feet. This climb is carefully routed up the hill, and without much difficulty we ascend to the high point for lunch. Our topo map tells us that is where we are but the forest is closed around us; no vista is awarded for a job well done. Lunchtime pleasures include freeing our feet from boot-prison, sock-drying in any available sun puddle, munching on various portable, mold-resistant breads with spreads, and resting. Declaring these to be pleasures is no careless boast. Such humble activities bring genuine delight, strategically placed in the middle of the day's toilsome miles. After lunch we descend into the Tionesta Watershed, 672 feet down again to the Bay! Intersecting route 321 we turn right to follow the road to Red Bridge, in order to cross South Branch River. We pass Red Bridge Campground, a memorial monument, and the road winds ahead of us into more woods. Marie and Dave are far ahead; I have stopped to read the monument. Finally I catch up. Where is this bridge? A careful re-survey of the maps indicates that we should have turned left at the highway. Groan. It is already past 6 p.m. and we must yet walk far enough to get away

from the road to camp. Returning past the campground, Marie and Dave walk in to see if any sites are available, despite our desire to camp alone. I guard the packs. They determine that established campgrounds are designed for people in cars! Not wishing to hike three more miles just to learn that the site is full (it seems well-peopled), they return and we shuffle on. At least we are now headed in the right direction.

The sun, low in the sky, is beautifully reflected as we cross Red Bridge, but we are too preoccupied with finding a tent site and eating supper to grasp the possible ruby origins of the bridge's name. The trail turns off the road and becomes a dragon with three hikers and a dog wearily trudging up its backbone. It need not turn its head to breathe fire, cook and eat us; it has cleverly sat up and is waiting for us to fall exhausted, dead at its feet. On our left is a wall of dragon spine-spikes, and to our right its side drops away around the ribcage. We follow the six-foot-wide path along our dragon's vertebrae. He (she?) sits angled at an average of 14 degrees, a 26% grade. "Couldn't you lie down, Mr. Dragon?" Regulations state that camping is permitted away from the path, but fifty feet straight up or twenty feet straight down are the only "away" options. It is quickly becoming dark in the woods.

"How many hikers have we actually seen in three days?" Marie queries.

"Only one group," comes the answer in all our minds.

"How does this flat spot look?"

"Wide enough for a tent."

Well, it is, barely. We eat a supper of cold odds and ends, and carefully ease around the edge of the drop-off into the tent door. "Be careful not to roll to your left," are Marie's last words to me that night. The day's 14 miles of hills at least guarantee there will be no trouble falling asleep. (Guidebook note: "there are no good campsites between Red Bridge and route 6")

Z-z-z-zip. Opening the tent door next morning, Sunday morning, I am greeted, blessed breathless with a favorite and familiar hymn come to life.

Morning has broken, like the first morning.
 Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.
 Praise for the singing, praise for the morning,
 Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word.

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven,
 Like the first dewfall on the first grass.
 Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
 Sprung in completeness where His feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning,
Born of the One Light, Eden saw play.
Praise with elation, praise every morning,
God's re-creation of the new day.



Celebrating in the green morning light

What had seemed so dragonish and bone-wearying the night before is transformed into one of those perfections for which I will keep venturing into the woods for as long as I can walk. Cool white shafts of sunlight burst in a gleaming aura from behind dark tree trunks. Yellow-green and grass-green leaves glow on each black twig and stalk. Beads of dew cling to every leaf-tip, poised at the decision-point to fall or evaporate. Miles of spider webs hang in wet-white nets just below me, over the cliff-edge. The whole world is green and shining white. An early crow caws a greeting, and a spring in the lower hollow answers in bubbly, yet subdued, glee. I lie quietly, stunned into worship. No

other response is possible. Marie and Dave are soon sharing the riches; there is plenty, freely given to all of us. This is indeed the Lord's Day.



Let me explain the theory of laundry. Hiking guru Colin Fletcher clearly advises taking two pairs of socks. One you wear, and the other you have washed the night before and hung on your pack to dry during the day. Mr. Fletcher did most of his hiking in the arid West. Well, I knew this. So I theorized that it might take two days for a pair of damp socks to dry in an Eastern Forest. Thus we take three pairs each, one to wear and two to have clipped outside in varying stages of dryness. We dutifully wash our first pair of socks at lunch on day two and find various ingenious ways to fasten them to buckles or through straps. Of course these are not dry by the next morning; this was not expected. So we wash our second pairs of socks and wear the third. Being in a courageous mood, Marie and I also wash underwear. By now the collection on the pack clothesline is becoming impressive, but not to worry, the first pair of socks is almost dry. Then it begins to rain. The semi-dry laundry is quite wet before we get the packs covered in their plastic rain jackets. O.K., tomorrow we will again wear the socks we have on now, and the others will all dry. It rains again. The daily

soakings continue for the duration of the hike. It doesn't usually rain for long, just regularly, and long enough to thoroughly dampen the laundry and sometimes us as well. This also inspires a game: should we stop and put on the ponchos and pack jackets, or will it stop in two minutes? We almost always guess wrong. Photos reveal us wearing plastic bags in sun, or with wet hair and clothes plastered, wrinkly about us with not a poncho in sight.

Thanks to the deer we lost our last pairs of dry socks. Deer had overbrowsed areas of the forest and the only plants that succeed in growing back in the openings are ferns. This creates huge fern-fields which have to be crossed. The walking is easy but we might as well be fording a stream. The closely spaced, compound, curved leaves hold buckets of rainwater. After 30 seconds in one of these fields we are soaked to the knees. Despite careful pre-trip waterproofing, our boots do not hold up to this continual assault. They soak through, and with this insult we give in to having constantly wet feet. By mid-hike pretty much everything we can wear is wet. Dave gives up and bags the mess in his pack, till his mom gets a whiff of it one night. Truthfully, we are all feeling quite nostalgic about being dry, so we begin cooking our clothes along with dinner. Open fires are allowed (with certain restrictions) so we have been building a fire each night anyway. We now begin stringing a clothesline above the fire and playing musical socks and t-shirts to keep each item above the fire for a carefully prescribed amount of time. The strategy is to let the item directly over the fire begin to steam, without letting it get hot enough to scorch. It is then moved to the farthest spot to cool and let the water evaporate while sliding the next item to the middle. We become adroit at sock and stew manipulation and don't come home with too many blackened briefs, or eat too many dinners flavored with ripe foot. It feels so grand to have dry socks for a few miles of each day, until we encounter a stretch of ferns, that we decide to go for broke. We also begin to dry our boots around the fire. We are probably shortening their life-spans a bit by doing this, but we don't really care. Dry feet make happy hikers.

When we had begun the hike, at the northern border of Pennsylvania, we had entered a rich, northern hardwood forest community. Indian Pipe poked through deep, scrunchy leaf litter below, oak and hickory leafed in a canopy high overhead. Glimpses of turkeys flashed in the shadows and Ruffed Grouse feathers were so numerous on the trail that we stopped collecting them. Once we passed a bathtub size patch of Northern Maidenhair Fern. It was so unusual with its crayon-green leaves carefully outlined in black, it made me think that someone used the cut and paste function to copy it there from some careful child's coloring book. After climbing away from Sugar Bay on day two we topped the ridge at the source of Hemlock Run and, without noticeable transition zone passed into an ecosystem dominated by

acid-loving plants. Sphagnum Moss, Bog Cranberry, and Goldthread covered the ground. Goldthread hoards its gold in the fine roots underground. For public viewing it displays a carpet of deep green waxy leaves with delicate white star blossoms sprinkled liberally above. The understory consisted of Moosewood with carousel striped bark, and Blueberry.

Time out from the ecology lesson for Dave to go nuts, er, berries... They were ripe. He ate so many that he could hardly manage dinner, and that is saying something! We made blueberry pancakes for breakfast, a genuine north country treat. Even Chips got into the act. He carefully pulled berries off the bushes with his lips and sampled them. (No, I'm not pulling your leg. He does this with raspberries and strawberries too.) The trees were almost all mature Black Cherry with its distinctive "potato chip" bark. Sadly, they all had no leaves! An inch-long marauder, called the Cherry Scallop Worm, has pursued his passion with vengeance. These worms ingeniously choose two cherry leaves, stack them carefully and chew around the perimeter, cementing them together. The edge-pattern of this no-seater-kayak-shaped breeding house is scalloped, hence their name. Don Dorn assured us that the permanent damage is slight unless they attack in several successive years. The destruction occurs late enough in the season that the trees don't expend much energy trying to refoliate. But it is strange to walk beneath bare trees in July.

Our gradual descent along Hemlock Run is one of those seldom-encountered ideals of hiking. The trail wanders gracefully along the bank above the rock-strewn, splashing Run. The sun sprinkles flakes of light around the forest, spicing the day and enhancing the flavors of hemlock and tannin which hang in the air. This is apparently a popular, but well-tended section. We pass several neat campsites with fireplaces and seats built of the ubiquitous sandstone.

On day five we enter the Tionesta Scenic Area. This is the largest stand of virgin forest in the eastern U.S.; six square miles, a diminutive but mature forest. Three-hundred-year-old Eastern Hemlocks watch us pass. How many different travelers have they watched: Algonquin, Iroquois, Redcoats, Tories, Bluecoats, Senecas, oil-drillers, narrow-gage rail engineers, and now backpackers? But not loggers, they missed this tiny patch. Are all the details of this history stored in tree-ring memory if we could but learn to read the code? Could we tap the trees, install a jack, and listen to fife and drum of a passing column of Loyalists? Would the memory-sap be spilled and gone after one listening? Someone would commercialize it. "Jars of home-canned Indian war-whoops." "Get your gen-u-ine Pennsylvania oil-boom, mood music here! Sounds of the forest with a track of rhythmic oil-well squeakings. Guaranteed to cure insomnia."

Trees here are so tall we can not see their tops from any vantage

point beneath them. For several days we had been finding ROCKS, calves of the mountain tumbled like giant-baby toy blocks around a playroom, but here we encounter ROCKS! Perhaps the giant-baby had abandoned them, but we can not. Despite the late afternoon hour and the fact that regulations require us to leave Tionesta before camping, we stop to play. These rocks are scattered willy-nilly down a gentle slope. They are nearly covered with moss and ferns which glow, fiery emerald trailer-size cut gems in the slanting sunlight. Dave climbs the scalable faces, I take inadequate photos, and Marie and Chips circle the blocks searching for treasures. We need to focus on miniatures to counter our feelings of insignificance in this quiet giant-world. A wavy band of waxy, apple-green Chrysoprase gleams opalescent from one granular yellow and umber wall. Tiny terrariums, more carefully planted by nature than any I ever succeeded in making, are tucked into angles of the rocks, flung carelessly over stony lips, strewn in wondrous abandon down slanting ledges. Scaly rashes of orange, red, brown, white or blue-green lichen erupt where moss can not yet wiggle its toes in deep enough to hold. Mysterious rows of small elliptical holes honeycomb some bands of the blocks forming geometrical, abstract art borders. A Red Eft is silhouetted as he pauses mid-scramble against the violent green moss, but paler orange somehow when he crawls across my hand. And the greatest mystery of all: in a tent-size pool at the base of one forward-tilting cube, from the entire bottom of this shallow, shadowed hollow something emanates a metallic-yellow phosphorescent light. A luminescent bacteria? Some strange algae? Witchcraft? In this eerie, silent realm of disproportions and oddly angled lights the golden phenomenon fits appropriately; we do not even shiver at its inexplicable, alien presence.

At length the light changes and the magic dissipates. We hoist our packs and move on to a comparatively drab and "normal" campsite. Another two days and we enter the final ecosystem. Instead of ankle-turning rock-litter the trail now smoothly works its way over humps and down hollows of a maple-beech forest. Its openness, comparative youth and light is a cheerful change from the dark and closed hemlock-rock experience of the days before. We had not realized the effect of the deeper forest until we felt the contrast of this lighter world.

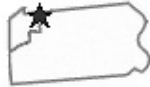
Triumphantly we hug the sign at the southern boundary. In the car we zip northward, covering superficially in two hours what we have studied with feet, fingers, ears, noses, eyes and muscles so carefully over the past ten days. A restaurant meal treat for the people and ice cream for all (don't forget Chips) completes the adventure... well, except for the fact that I spend the next three days curb-camping in Bradford with car trouble. Such inconveniences are easily discounted in the overwhelming fulfillment of a quest.

I have somehow neglected to mention the puffy, creamy peach fungus as big as a platter, the twenty-eight hummingbirds, names as descriptive as Cornplanter Bridge, Sheriff Run (which parallels Fool's Creek) or as plain as The Branch, the private jokes, the night camped in the deer conference grounds with the herd stamping and snorting around our tents, the giant slugs, a hundred other details, and the sign to "Heart's Content—28 miles." I knew that was a lie; I have found mine right here.



Memories that stick with us

In ten days we walked through five counties, four ecosystems, two watersheds, and 300 million years— several times. We were tired. But sometimes it is the little things that stick with you. Pun intended. For more than a year afterwards we would occasionally find unique, green Pennsylvania stick-tight seed pods in our socks.



98 miles this hike
Allegheny National Forest, PA
150 miles total NCT