

# Carey Hamilton: Her journey to an experience



John Maxwell

By Michael Ellis

**A** Chinese proverb says “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

Fair enough, but what if you wanted to go more than twice that far? How do you start that long of a journey? Carey Hamilton found the answer when she hiked the

2,100-mile Appalachian Trail in 1997.

The “AT” stretches through 14 Eastern states on a continuous marked footpath between Maine’s Mount Katahdin and Georgia’s Springer Mountain. It takes about six months to “thru hike” it. The trail traverses wild, scenic, wooded, pastoral and culturally significant lands

of the Appalachian Mountains

Let’s start at the trailhead, not of the AT, but of Carey’s journey to this experience.

## **Little steps, big ones when you can**

As a child, Hamilton relished day trips to McCormick’s Creek State Park. One of her most vivid memories is of a long summer’s-day hike through the park with two friends. The trio scaled a muddy hillside, sloshed through the creek, climbed the waterfall and ran the trails. That magical day started her lifetime love of the outdoors. More challenging paths awaited.

“My first real adventures began during college in Florida, when my dad purchased a rather unreliable 22-foot sailboat. We rode out a storm, not knowing if we might drift away.

“We broke down at various inopportune times and we camped on the boat, docking at marinas or anchoring out. But, all the hassle and sometimes scary moments were well worth the great ones, such as dolphins saddling up to the boat and amazing sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico.

“My adventurous spirit was unleashed,” Hamilton said.

## **What life trail to travel?**

As many of us, Carey took a while figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. After transferring to Indiana University, she got hooked on environmental-policy issues.

The future AT hiker interned briefly at the Hoosier Environmental Council, then landed a position at the Indiana Department of Environmental Management working on air-quality issues. She was at IDEM two years before being pulled away to her adventure on the Appalachian Trail.





Michael Jeffries

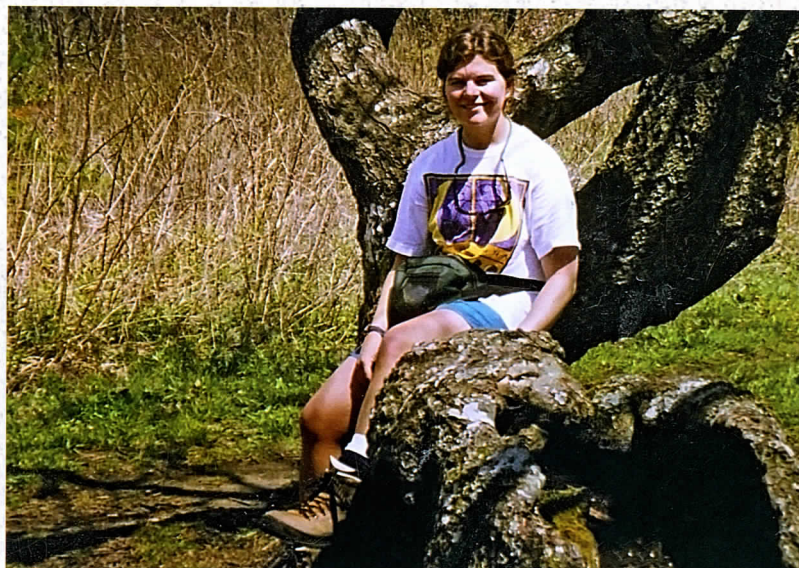
At that time, she had never backpacked. Her longest hikes had lasted four hours. But, she had read the book, "There are Mountains to Climb," former Carmel housewife Jean Deeds' account of her solo hike of the AT. The challenge enchanted her. She resolved, if only vaguely, that she too would like to take on this trail.

On March 30, 1997, Hamilton picked up Deed's book again. This time she read it straight through the night. The next morning, she handed in her two-week notice. She spent every evening of the next two weeks buying gear and preparing for the hike. Several times, she loaded a full pack on her back and hiked the White River in Holiday Park, and through Eagle Creek Park.

#### The AT journey begins

"On April 16, 1997, my father drove me to Georgia. The next day

*Carey works as a part-time advocate at the Statehouse to promote environmental issues such as renewable energy, clean air and children's health (opposite page, left). At the head of the AT in Springer Mountain, Ga. In her pack she's carrying survival items, including duct tape—yes, it's considered indispensable by hikers too. She carved the hiking stick out of a limb from her backyard (above, left). Resting on an unusually shaped tree at the state line of Georgia and North Carolina (above, right),*



Submitted photo

we headed for the trailhead on top of Springer Mountain. Dad walked the first few miles with me and then I was off," Carey said.

She had never camped in the woods in a tent before, had never filtered her water from a trailside water source and had never used a privy. But she knew she would love it. Luckily, she did.

When Hamilton took on this endeavor, the allure of the AT was, in part, the physical and mental challenge of walking, every day, for six months, often in extreme terrain, weather, or both. Just as motivating was the opportunity to see the Appalachian Mountains in this special way.

"To be so in sync with nature and to experience so many breathtaking moments was a dream come true," she said. "I loved the simple daily routine—

waking without an alarm clock, packing my gear, eating breakfast and then, just walking.

"Being almost one with my pack—which contained all I needed to get by—the simplicity of that was something I truly reveled in."

She also enjoyed "town" days, when she would explore new communities, pick up mail, eat fresh food and sleep on a bed. She fondly remembers many small towns with lots of character, and friendly, interesting people.



## Appalachian Trail

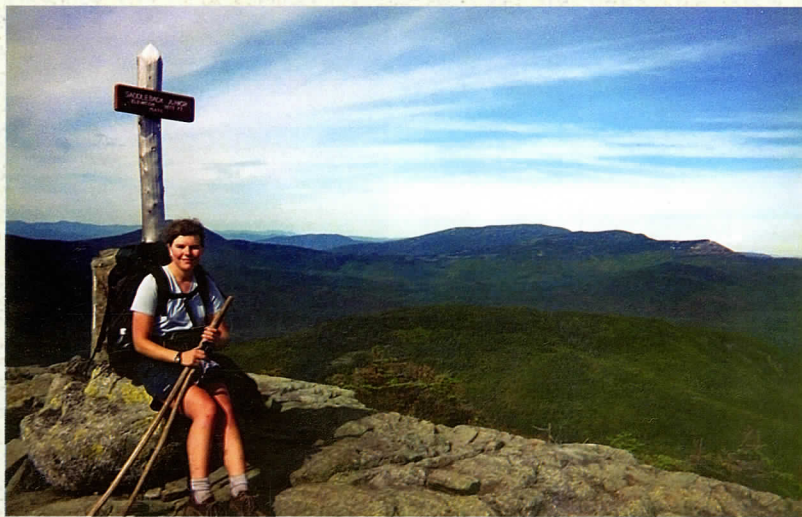
Sally Letsinger



## Indiana's KT

Indiana has its own version of the AT in southern Indiana, the Knobstone Trail (KT). Hikers, who use its rugged terrain to train for the AT, call it the "Little Appalachian." Total trail length is 49 miles without hiking the loops, 58 with them.

For more information about the KT go to: [dnr.IN.gov/knobstone](http://dnr.IN.gov/knobstone).



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## Finding her trail name

On hikes like these, virtually everyone eventually gets a trail name, a moniker that describes something unique in the personality or actions of the person dubbed. Fellow hikers generally identify themselves and others only by these names while on the trail.

Hamilton often found herself camping near a few of the same faces. One was an older gentleman from Atlanta with whom she hiked one afternoon. His trail name was The Great Santini.

"A great majority of my hiking was solo but a lot was also done loosely with a group," she said. "We hiked at different paces but planned to camp or 'town' together. We might pass each other at a nice break spot, but we spent most of the day alone."

Carey had no trail name yet. To help her come up with one, Santini asked her about herself and her interests. After a few hours and several rejected names, he suggested Soul Traveler.

"I wasn't sure at first as it seemed a bit too serious, but as he explained it, I agreed it was a good fit, Hamilton said.

"He said 'you're traveling alone, solo; you crave the sun, the Spanish *sol*; you are traveling by the soles of your feet; and you are enriching your soul.'"

Carey agreed that *sol*, soul, solo and sole had real significance.



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"After almost two weeks of rain I was begging for the sun to shine, after three days of hiking I had to swap my boots for a better fit to protect my soles, and traveling alone, solo, was something I was proud of.

"And, most importantly I really was hoping to learn to live a more soulful life."

Most trail names, she said, are much easier to explain. Trail Snail was a slow hiker. Mr. Clean was a short, bald, muscular hiker. Moses had a beard and traveled with a large wood hiking stick.

## Trail magic

AT hikers call encounters with friendly townspeople "trail magic."

Stories of kindness by strangers met along the journey are never ending, amazing and inspiring. Hamilton had her share.

"Three weeks into my hike, I was looking forward to climbing a 'bald' top mountain in North Carolina, she said. "I had heard that the

*Carey reached Saddleback Junior, Maine, after 4 1/2 months. At an elevation of 3,655 feet, it offers a fantastic 360-degree view. Notice the two hiking sticks. She found the second by a telephone booth in Pennsylvania (above, top). At Katahdin stream campground, her last stop before her final ascent on Mount Katahdin. Just before her climb, it snowed for two days (above, bottom). With husband Derek and their two boys, Aidan and Leo (opposite page, right).*



view was spectacular on a clear day, which luckily that day was.”

There was a dirt road to the top, so when she neared the peak, modern hustle-bustle civilization, in the form of an SUV hauling three retired couples, greeted her.

“I was very disappointed—my solitary moment and view from the peak was not to be. As I passed the group I offered to take a photo for them. They were very nice and after a few minutes of talking were very interested in my adventure and offered to take me in for the night. After a brief hesitation, I said yes.”

The group shared a large, beautiful mountainside cabin. The hostess offered Carey a hot shower, a plush robe and washed the hiker’s few pieces of clothing.

“Next came a gourmet dinner and great conversation. After a cozy night’s sleep they drove me back to the AT, with another great memory made. My night in the cabin was even more of a blessing than I had imagined. My fellow hikers reported suffering through the coldest night that time of year in a decade. They woke that morning with water bottles frozen solid. I knew I had been looked after that night and had been touched by trail magic.”

By this point, she had hiked Georgia and North Carolina. During the next several weeks Carey trekked through the 550 miles of Virginia. She claims no favorite state, but said she particularly enjoyed the Virginia miles of trail, which were surrounded by rhododendron, and their many mountain-top campsites with beautiful views.

On July 4th weekend, when she hit the halfway point at Harper’s Ferry, W. Va., Hamilton took off for a few days with friends, staying at



Edward Wilson

a grand old hotel in that historic Civil War town.

#### Hitting the wall

In mid-August, she lost track of some fellow hikers because visitors from home delayed her progress. Suddenly, going it alone was tough. After a few weeks of this unwanted solitude, she set out to find her friends.

“As a result I missed a 60-mile section of the trail in Vermont,” she said. “It was tough to make the decision, but when I found my old friends, I realized it was worth losing a few miles. Their good company helped me get through the last several weeks.”

Those were some of the most challenging, and most stunning.

“The White Mountains in New Hampshire were simply spectacular, and after months of hiking I was up to the extreme physical challenge. By the time we got to Maine, leaves were starting to change, and the nights were very cold. The last few hundred miles were extremely demanding, but it was also such a thrill to know I would make it to Katahdin.”

Carey finished the AT in Octo-

ber, came back home and slowly adjusted to life back in Indiana. After a few months she rejoined state government, this time in an environmental-policy position.

“In 1999, I met my future husband. We moved to California where he went to graduate school and I worked for the City of San Jose’s environmental-policy office. We lived briefly in Ogden Dunes on Lake Michigan in northwest Indiana, and then we moved back home to Indianapolis. In the meantime we had two beautiful boys.”

Hamilton said she is thankful for her AT adventure, and looks forward to eventually hiking the small Vermont section she missed, this time with her husband and children.

Like this Hoosier, we too are on a journey. Some, like hers, are longer. Some are higher; some are lower. Remember, with help from friends—or sometimes even strangers we meet on the trail, we can make it, together, just as she did.

Enjoy the journey! ■

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