

## The Who, What, Where, and Whys

**Sitting at Standing Indian:** The mountain loomed over my shoulders as I reached the Deep Gap trailhead on a section hike of the Appalachian Trail in March of 2004. This was the middle of the Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hiker migration and the first fellow I ran across was sitting on a log, looking up the hill.

“Hi!” I chirped as I walked up to begin my normal banter with a “thru.” However this was not going to be a happy conversation. A “twenty-something,” HeadsUp looked at me with hollow eyes—wistful eyes.

“How’s the hike coming along?” I supported.

“Knees are wrecked.... I don’t know how much further I can go,” he complained in a hopeless monotone. “How far to the road on that blue blaze trail?”

I had just walked across the Kimsey Creek Trail, a blue-blazed connector to the AT from the Forest Service’s Standing Indian Campground. It was a little more than four miles to the parking lot and then a couple more miles to the Rainbow Springs Campground beyond that.

It was an hour until sunset.

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“I guess I’ll go on up to the shelter and decide what to do in the morning,” my new acquaintance said as I began the half-mile uphill segment to the Standing Indian Shelter.

He got there about dark.

We talked a little that evening. He had prepared to be on the trail for the next four months—fulfilling a dream several years old. Here we were less than 100 miles into his 2100-mile hike, and he was done. He had been excited about this trip for months, but he was about to go back home. He had to. His knees were wrecked.

### **So What’s the Book About?**

This book is about long distance hiking. My experience and most of the examples are from the Appalachian Trail (AT). The book details the three biggest problems facing a 200-mile hiker and also goes into the advantages of near-ultralight hiking.

The three problems have plagued most of the people I have seen drop off the AT either as thru-hikers or as section hikers.

The big three hike enders are:

**Blisters and Chafing**

**Knee Pain**

**Losing The Will to Hike**

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The chapter describing ultra-light hiking is: **The one best idea—A 15-pound pack.**

The book is produced in a format and style that make it easy to carry it while hiking. There's also enough room in the margins to scribble notes and ideas.

**Who Wrote It?** This book is the story of how I have learned from my own mistakes (and those of others) as I have prepared to hike long distances. It offers no formula or system guaranteed to work for everyone—just one that works for me. It describes my discoveries, my failures, my ideas, and what I have tried. I am writing it in the hope that it will be of interest to a reader, but I am the first to advise hikers to work out personal answers for themselves.

My goal is to hike the Appalachian Trail—the whole thing. This is 2100+ miles along the rough, serpentine, backbone of the East Coast mountains of the United States. However, at this point in my journey, I think it is worthwhile to write about what I have learned so far.

This book is about making a good beginning. It is about the details of that experience.

After a year of preparation, I successfully hiked a continuous 200-mile section hike along the AT for my 51<sup>st</sup> birthday. I began at Springer Mountain,

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Georgia on a mid-May day, and finished the long section hike 13 days later on the top of Clingman's Dome in the middle of the Smoky Mountains.

**Worthwillity:** As I think back on the people I have seen drop off the AT in those first two weeks of their hikes—I feel compassion and a great sense of waste.

All who walk the trail learn something about themselves. This is true whether they walk 13 miles, 200 miles, or 2100 miles. Learning is good. But I feel for everyone I meet who has dropped off the trail. I experience some of their pain as I think about all the plans and dreams and money spent on their long distance hike, gone down the drain.

My reasons for writing the book involve the dilemma that Head'sUp (with the knee pain) was facing at Deep Gap. Another part of my reasoning involves the pain I saw in good guys with rubbed-raw blisters. Blisters like these drive people off the trail at Winding Stair Gap every year. Likewise, I have seen people hobbling into Dick's Gap searching for help with chaffed thighs. What's more, I have experienced my own pains in all these anatomic areas and more. I have heard stories of nightmares that drove people from the trail. I've seen failed equipment drive people nearly mad with cold and known the problems of cold myself.

Each and every problem has a specific prevention and treatment. Learning the lessons is as important to the hiker as learning to suck is to a baby. But

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the schooling a hiker has to accomplish is not as instinctive as anything a baby learns. For these assignments, I have needed to stay alert in class.

As I hiked those two weeks and 200 miles of my 51<sup>st</sup> Birthday Hike, I had a ball. It was the most fun I have ever had.

It occurred to me that as an oldster hiker, I should be having considerably more difficulty than most of the youngsters sharing the path with me. But it was not that way.

This is not to say that I am any kind of super athlete. I'm not. I'm a desk-bound research physician at the end of a government career and at the beginning of a hiking career. I have stayed in reasonable shape, but nothing spectacular. It has been 8 or 9 years since I last played basketball with my kids—too much knee pain. I can run a mile and a half in 12 minutes—good enough to pass muster in the Air Force—but not good enough to do a respectable 5 km fun run any more.

I have personally resolved to do my best to prepare not to fail. To that end I have thought long and hard about how to get myself ready for the trail before every hike. I have practiced or experimented with technique and equipment in the safety of small overnight hikes, and then on longer hikes. Finally, I used them for a full two-week hike—successfully.

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The example I leave is simple. If what I am doing in my hike is working, I keep doing it. If it is not working, then I take on the responsibility to find a better way, and then a better way after that.

My methods and ideas in this book are not the only way to hike the trail. I don't want to scold or scare anyone to hike like I do. Nevertheless, I do hope this book will prompt others to find successful ways to hike, too.

**A note on geography:** The book's genesis is my experience walking on the Appalachian Trail. But the book's usefulness is not entirely limited to the AT. The lessons I've learned apply to many other trails. But some of the ideas are specific to the AT. A good example would be my water management system to maintain good hydration. On the southern AT, I can generally expect at least one good water source every five miles, and certainly every ten miles. There are a lot of trails in the western part of the US where this sort of assumption would be suicidal. Water stops can be spread much more thinly than in the rain forest of the southeast US.

**Perspective, Perspiration, and Perseverance:** My perspective is more complicated than that of many of the people I meet. I am a physician, an engineer, and a researcher. Those are complementary backgrounds to bring to the problems of long distance hiking.

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I received my medical degree in 1979 and have had three careers as a physician. I started practice as a family practice doc in northern Kentucky. Within a few years, I entered the Air Force and became an Aerospace Medicine specialist. This gave me credentials in preventive medicine as well as clinical medicine. As part of my administrative research career, it became possible for me to go back to school and earn a master's degree in Electrical Engineering. Through this, I developed an appreciation for the organized way in which engineers approach problems.

Finally, I was given the superb opportunity to invent, plan, and carry out my own research program. I learned to suspect assumptions and what everyone else already believed.

So, when I take my perspective to a problem, like blisters, I try to think about it like a clinical doc, a prevention specialist, an engineer, and a research physician. I am interested in relieving pain, using hiking poles, making the most of rest breaks, and showing that all these measures work together.

**My Hiking Philosophy:** My request to all I meet on the trail, and my blessing, is that they *walk well*. Walking well involves purpose, preparation, traveling on foot, and having fun going somewhere with integrity. I'll have a little more to say about this later, but there is no attempt here to get anyone to walk my way. I have no desire for anyone else to think the way I do nor to hike in the way I have discovered works for me.

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At the same time, if a reader of this book finds one of my experiences useful, then I will rejoice. I will especially rejoice if I learn about it in an email or at a campsite.

A friend of mine has wisely proposed from his experience that people who have a philosophy of hiking succeed at their hiking more often than people who have not considered why they are walking in the woods. People who don't know why they are hiking often find no reason to continue. So I have a responsibility, if I am to walk well, to be able to describe my philosophy. That sounds academic, but it really is not. It really is quite simple.

At the most basic level, my philosophy is all about learning and having fun. I believe the one almost always leads to the other. At one higher level of inspection, I enjoy traveling by foot. I think I was born thinking it is wonderful to participate in what our 18<sup>th</sup> century ancestors experienced as they crisscrossed the country on walking trails. I like to be self-reliant and carry what I need on my back. For me, hiking is about travel, and not very much about camping.

Someday, I hope I can meet many of the people who read these words. I savor the opportunity to hear stories of your travels. And I earnestly hope each and every hiker who longs to walk a long distance finds the time and will to try. I hope without ceasing, that some will have a Wildly Successful 200-Mile Hike.

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Without much more ado, it is time to say:

Walk Well,  
Rick Allnutt, MD  
AT Trail Name “Risk”

March 2005  
Beavercreek, Ohio