



Don Fellows



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# TRAMPS *of* UTICA

By Patricia Malin

You're undoubtedly familiar with some form of the slogan, "Neither rain nor snow nor gloom of night can stay these messengers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

If that brings to mind hardy postal officials, think again! While it has been used as a credo of sorts for postal carriers, dedication to succeed on their "rounds" seems to also have been bestowed on members of the Tramp & Trail (T&T) Club of Utica, the oldest hiking club in New York State.

Mother Nature has often thrown down the gauntlet during a T&T activity, but she has rarely succeeded in preventing the completion of appointed rounds. In the last 90 years, there have been times when the club's members went hiking in 100-degree heat, cross-country skiing in near blizzards, cycling along rural roads littered with the debris of a hurricane, or kayaking on streams diminished by droughts or bolstered by floods.

Such persistence is deeply entrenched. On Dec. 17, 2011, the members (known fondly as "Tramps") recorded the club's 6,000<sup>th</sup> hike on a Black River Environmental Improvement Area trail on Egypt Road in the Town of Boonville, northern Oneida County. The event drew about 25 hikers who endured (gasp!) a 40-degree temperature on trails devoid of a single snowflake.

On the club's 5,000<sup>th</sup> hike on Feb. 15, 2003, on this same trail, the actual temperature was -10°F, but otherwise clear and sunny. The members, who had carpooled from a central location about 25 miles away, parked on the shoulder of the road, dutifully gathered up their poles and skis, breached the high snowbanks and proceeded to the trailhead. There was plenty of powder and the snow glistened invitingly. The participants skied the quarter-mile to the warming hut, then darted in and out of the building, tempting the cold to freeze their noses. The hardy group explored

the well-marked, groomed and tree-lined trails, but there were almost no other skiers in the vicinity that day. Who's crazy enough to do that?

Well, today's members shake their heads in disbelief when reviewing the trips their predecessors pursued in the early decades of the twentieth century. The first recorded T&T hike on April 30, 1921 was a mere 5 ½ to 6 miles in Utica's Roscoe Conkling Park and the surrounding Cascade Glen. That hike drew 17 hikers (6 men and 11 women). Their names and photographs were later submitted to the Utica Public Library, which houses the club's records to this day.

The original schedule called for four "walks" a month, but early club members deemed it necessary to include one all-day hike (the first one was 14 miles), plus occasional auto trips. Such an itinerary bore the stamp of a gentleman named Meade Dobson. A real estate executive who was not a Utican, Dobson is remembered as an "enthusiastic hiker and climber," and suggested the name of the club to the organizers.

Dobson had been active in hiking clubs elsewhere, including the Appalachian Club and Green Mt. Club, and felt there was a need for a similarly well-rounded and recreational organization in the Mohawk Valley. Though he lived in Utica for less than two years, he accomplished his goal. In June 1921, Dobson published an article in the *New York Evening Post* entitled, "New Tramp and Trail Club of Utica Finds Many Alluring Paths," and marveled at the contrast, even then, between bustling downstate and rural upstate's inviting wooded valleys. Dobson appears to have been a Johnny Appleseed of the hiking world! After leaving Utica, he went on to establish the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) in Glens Falls in 1922.

Despite their common origin, these two organizations proceeded to evolve in vastly different directions. T&T remains



insular and interested in local activities, though not in a negative way. The emphasis is on hiking within a loosely formed social, apolitical environment. ADK, on the other hand, has chapters throughout the state and at-large members in other states. The board of directors at headquarters emphasizes advocacy and directs its members to pursue issues related to wilderness and conservation.

In early years, T&T Club members made about 40 hikes annually, but then discovered the pleasures of winter hiking and cross-country skiing. Soon they became full, four-season outdoor enthusiasts. Now T&T's hike committee meets four times a year to plan a three-month schedule based on member submissions. The club organizes a total of about 104

hikes per year. Depending on the outing, a "hike" might feature cycling, kayaking, skiing or snowshoeing, or an actual walk on a woods trail. The event might include a swim, a picnic, and perhaps a discussion of wildflowers or birds. Plus, there is always sightseeing!

A different activity is scheduled for every Saturday and Sunday. Participation, which is not mandatory after the initial year, can bring out any number of the 230 club members. And whether it's a jaunt in a local town park or a difficult snowshoe trek on the Tug Hill Plateau some 50 miles to the north, there is no guarantee that the weather on May 17 will be any better than November 17. Nevertheless, the leader and co-leader of the hike guarantee that they will show up and carry out their duties, rain or shine.

Most of the hikes are within a two- or three-hour radius of Utica and are described as easy, moderate or difficult. Conventional woodland hikes, snowshoeing and skiing are from three to

seven miles long on marked DEC trails. Many of the bike rides typically average 25-30 miles. Kayaking trips (canoes are rarely used) vary in length.

Utica is a gateway to the Adirondack Mountains, so it's almost certain that participants will find snow throughout the winter, although in recent years the ski season appears to be slowly shrinking. Because of this observation, the club's descriptions of its hikes throughout the past nine decades become an unexpected gem of meteorological interest.

If there is no snow or if conditions are otherwise poor at the designated trailhead, the members go in search of better conditions elsewhere. The hike still proceeds and gets officially recorded. The club does not condone hazardous travel; leaders attempt to find a more acceptable substitute hike closer to home.

One of the club's favorite events is High Peaks Weekend held in early August. T&T reserves about six campsites at the ADK campground near Lake Placid and approximately 30 or 40 members tent there for the weekend. It's a boom time for members who are trying to bag their 46 peaks, but it's just as acceptable for a member to kayak in Heart Lake or to climb Mt. Jo.

Considering the convenience of modern, lightweight clothing and equipment and freeze-dried, packaged food, it's hard to believe that the Tramps began tackling the High Peaks in 1925 and frequently experienced wilderness camping. In August 1940, the members endured a long railroad trip to the Canadian Rockies in preparation for the club's 1,000<sup>th</sup> hike. One member reported that they spent a few nights "wrapped in several layers of white Hudson Bay blankets" under a canopy of snow-covered tents. In Jasper Park, they embarked on an 18-mile "walk" at elevations of more than 8,000 feet. Today's Tramps never face such a demanding test.

The 3,000<sup>th</sup> hike came during a two-week vacation to Wind River, WY, in the summer of 1979. T&T celebrated its



The T&T Club's "hikes" include a variety of activities, from biking and kayaking to cross-country skiing.

4,000<sup>th</sup> outing with a conventional ski at local Carmichael Hill on Mar. 7, 1993.

In addition to the official weekend schedule, many of today's retirees and senior citizen Tramps have organized into two unofficial weekday groups known as the "911" (for the hearty) and the "shorties."

Well aware of its history in the Mohawk Valley, the T&T Club has increased its visibility in the last decade. It publicizes its hiking schedule in local newspapers; members share videos of their vacations with the public; and the club invites guides, authors or speakers to participate in "Interesting Evenings." At least three times a year, the club donates its manpower to clearing and maintaining hiking and ski trails. DEC has officially declared Tramp & Trail the caretaker of the Carpenter Road trails on the backside of the Snow Ridge Ski Resort in Turin. The Tramps also take a personal interest in cleaning up the Erie Canal and Barge Canal trails that connect to the Utica Marsh Wildlife Refuge. Every June, July and August, as part of the summer-long Utica Monday night cultural series, T&T Club members volunteer to lead the public on tours of local parks.

As with any social group, there are good times galore. Just last October, two elderly grandmothers threw a "46ers" party. Through a slide presentation, they related their roller-coaster journey over the years to hike each of the 46 Adirondack mountains over 4,000 feet. Their quest to climb the High Peaks began with early enthusiasm, joyfully singing "Climb Every Mountain." More often than not, though, their success was reflected more by the lyrics of "Mama Told Me There'd Be Days Like This."

As it was in 1921, it's never about the destination; rather, it's about the journey, sharing conversations and recollections among members young and old. And despite our often painful experience with blisters, bruises, broken equipment, worn-out hiking boots, endless years of black fly bites, sun, shadows, fog, rain, sleet, snow, and mud on our faces, the quest to reach our goal continues. In the end, the Tramps fully expect to be unstoppable for yet another century.

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