



DWIGHT ROSS JR./SAR

Members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, Chuck Logan (front), George Owen (center) and Jack Camp, do cleanup work last weekend.

Volunteers Hack Trail Almost a Decade Long

'Tenacious Group' Fashioned Path Through 78.5 Miles of Wilderness

By John Harmon
Staff Writer

BLUE RIDGE, Ga. — On cold, wet days at the start of the decade when only a handful of volunteers showed up to hack a hiking trail through rugged mountains near here, George Owen had his doubts.

"Sometimes it just seemed so overwhelming, but we never stopped," said the Atlanta minister, who helped organize what would evolve into one of the largest volunteer conservation projects in Georgia.

Neither January's icy winds nor the blazing sun of July kept the group from completing its nine-year task of building, by hand, the 78.5-mile Benton MacKaye Trail.

Today, at a backwoods road where the trail crosses at Dyer Gap west of Blue Ridge, members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association will gather with U.S. Forest Service officials to dedicate Georgia's newest and longest footpath.

Running from 3,782-foot high Springer Mountain to Double Springs Gap on the Tennessee line in the lush Cohutta Wilderness, the trail tra-

DEDICATED Continued on A11

Dedicated Volunteers Fashion 78.5-Mile Trail Through Wilderness

From Page A1

verses some of North Georgia's lesser-known peaks. Though it lacks the numerous vistas, the high elevations and lean-to shelters of the better known Appalachian Trail (AT), which also starts at Springer Mountain, the Benton MacKaye Trail affords more solitude and views of two white-water rivers, the Toccoa and the Jacks.

"I feel like I'm paying my dues by working on this trail," said the association's president, Darcy Camp, an Atlanta special education teacher, as he and other volunteers cleared a portion of the trail recently. "It's like I'm putting something back for all the times I've enjoyed camping and hiking."

Founded by Mr. Owen and eight other hiking enthusiasts in 1980, the association worked on the trail at least one Saturday each month — with the exception of one particularly snowy January a few years ago.

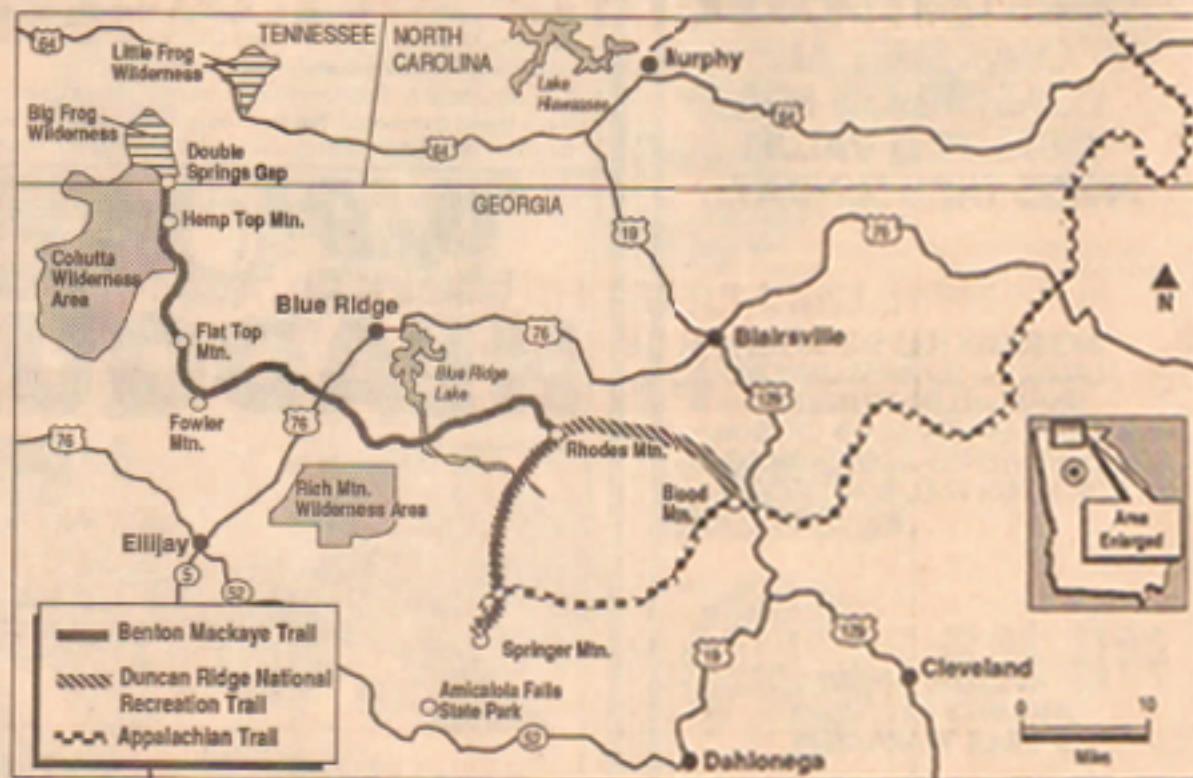
When not working, association members recruited friends and fellow outdoorsmen. The group now numbers 145, the majority from metro Atlanta.

The Forest Service provided tools and financed the construction of two creek bridges in 1987, but almost all the labor and materials has been provided by the volunteers.

As a section was built, it was opened for hiking and maintained by the volunteers.

Association members hope the MacKaye Trail does not end at the Tennessee border. Their long-term plan is to extend it northward through the remote Unicoi Mountains along the Tennessee and North Carolina border and eventually connect it with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. A Tennessee chapter already has organized.

The 250-mile route through the three states was part of the original concept envisioned in 1975 as an alternative to the heavily traveled



southern portion of the AT.

Running for some 2,100 miles from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Maine, the AT was completed in 1937 and is North America's most famous backpacking trail.

A pioneer 20th century planner from Massachusetts, Benton MacKaye (the last syllable rhymes with pie, as in the proper Celtic pronunciation) originated the AT in 1921 as part of a regional planning program to preserve wilderness in the eastern United States. The route traced by the Benton MacKaye Trail follows part of his

original plan for the AT, which was later changed to a more easterly route.

When the idea was first proposed in 1900, officials with the national forests in Tennessee and North Carolina said no. But in North Georgia, Chattahoochee National Forest supervisor W. Pat Thomas embraced the idea as a way of meeting a growing demand for hiking paths in an era when almost no money was being appropriated for such projects, said Gilbert Massie, recreation officer in the Chattahoochee.

Later, regional authorities in Atlanta said

they would agree to the overall plan if the volunteers finished the Georgia portion of the trail. One of them admits he did not think they were up to the challenge.

"They are a tenacious group. They really surprised me," said Charles Huppach, a forest service trails specialist.

Earlier this year, Regional Forester John E. Alcock verbally agreed to extending the trail into the Cherokee and Nantahala national forests.

The project almost died in 1984 when active members dwindled to less than five, said former president Edwin Dale, a semi-retired Emory University professor who lives near Blue Ridge. It got a boost when he began recruiting hikers he saw on the trail, which indirectly resulted in Marty Dominy, an engineer, joining the group in 1985.

Mr. Dominy helped the volunteers route the path in ways that made construction easier. He and Dr. Dale also collaborated recently on the production of a series of nine topographic maps of the trail.

Club members say much work remains in Georgia. Some of the original trail is steep and has little solid footway. They plan to rework those sections in the next year.

"I see this as an opportunity to be involved in building something that will outlive me," said Tom Wright, a furniture manufacturer's representative from the Atlanta area, as he took a break from a recent outing to clear weeds and briars from the trail. "Something my children can enjoy."

Additional information and maps for \$1 each can be obtained by writing the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, P.O. Box 53271, Atlanta, 30355.