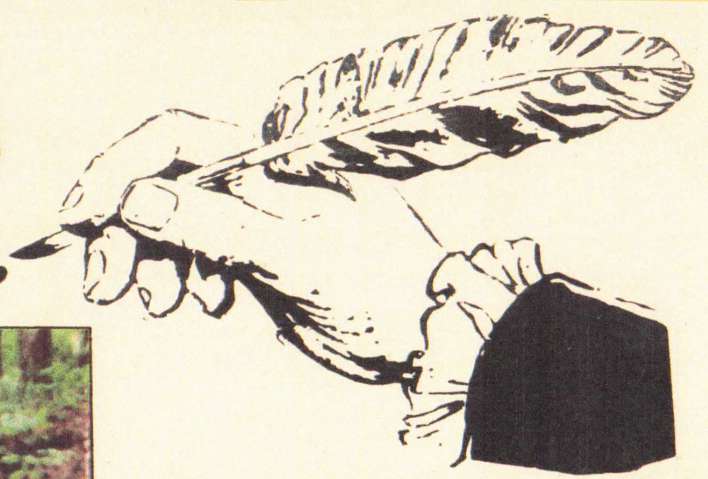


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Benton MacKaye Trail Association members Ted Reissing, president, and Lynn Strubank, board member, explain how to clear a hiking trail through forest land. PHOTO BY L. GUIRRERI

Dunwoody Trailblazers Welcome Company As They Cut A Modest Path Through Forests and Wilderness

By Lenore Guirrerri

Wanted: Trailblazers of all ages who enjoy people and nature to help maintain nearly 80 miles of Georgia hiking trail.

It took members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) nearly 10 years and about 14,000 volunteer hours to complete the Benton MacK-

aye Trail in north Georgia, but their work is never done. Newcomers are always welcome.

"You don't have to be anything except healthy. We have

had people 3 to 83," remarks Ted Reissing of Dunwoody and president of the group. He joined BMTA in 1984 and has been trailblazing ever since.

"You would never do this for money," he continues, "It's the hardest work I've ever done."

Clearing a trail is also rewarding.

Organized in 1980 in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the BMTA realized the dream of Forester Benton MacKaye. He envisioned a continuous trail along the crest of the entire Appalachian Mountain Trail.

In 1921, MacKaye (pronounced Mackeye) originally intended to use the western ridge of the mountains to complete the Appalachian Trail (AT) in Georgia. Unfortunately, Mother Nature and a lack of funds put the plan on the backburner for several decades.

Years later, the BMTA was formed to finish MacKaye's

trail. Now a group of about 150 (an estimated 50 are active in the trailblazing), BMTA meets every second Saturday of the month in rain, shine or snow to clear a piece of the hiking trail.

The Benton MacKaye Trail begins at Springer Mountain, Georgia, intertwines with the AT for several miles, then moves northwest through the Chattahoochee National Forest on to the Cohutta Wilderness at the Tennessee state line.

The association's work isn't completed, they hope. Members are waiting for the okay by Tennessee officials this summer to allow the BMTA to extend the trail into the neighboring state. The plan is to enter the trail into the Cherokee National Forest, crossing the AT again in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and eventually completing a double loop with the AT at the Davenport Gap.

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The Benton MacKaye Trail will hopefully relieve the AT of some hiking traffic and give backpackers an alternative to experience treasured park areas and wilderness.

"It affords people the opportunity to get into nature," says Lynn Strubank, a BMTA board member who joined the group in 1981. "It's getting to the point where I'd rather build the trail rather than hike it," she jokes.

Each person, regardless of experience, is instructed on safety measures and proper clearing methods. Since power tools are banned by the U.S. Forest Service in designated wilderness areas, most of the cutting of the four foot wide, eight foot high trail is done by manpower using rakes, shears and, sometimes, saws.

For its efforts, the association has been recognized by Georgia for its public/private partnerships in the Take Pride in America campaign and was also honored with the Governor's Award for volunteer service.

Future plans include the development of campsites and utilizing the trail as an educational resource. For more information, write to BMTA, P.O. Box 53271, Atlanta, GA 30355-1271 or call 393-1853.