

SIX WEEKS ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL
Springer Mountain GA to Erwin TN
March 11 to April 22, 2013
Trail name: Werdigo

Our excited last night for me at home ended at 3:30 AM, Monday March 11, 2013, when we arose to prepare for the flight to Atlanta. We left the house, headed for the airport, about 4:30 AM, and by 5:15AM I was through security and waiting at the gate for the 6:30 flight! Smooth as silk. The plane landed shortly after 8 AM, but my shuttle driver couldn't arrive until about noon. We made a couple of stops, and reached the Springer Mountain parking area shortly after 2:00 PM. Again... smooth as silk!

The shuttle driver told a funny story: He once dropped off a small group of first-time backpackers, in pre-dawn darkness on a foggy, rainy morning. He was a half-mile down Forest Service road 42 when his cell phone rang: "What do we do now?" Fortunately, no such problem with me; after he left at 2:30 PM, I donned rain gear and the pack and headed south the 0.9 miles to Springer's summit. The summit steward or shelter maintainer, a young blond woman, greeted me as I was ascending, and later as I descended. I reached the summit at 3:15, signed the register, sent my first SPOT "OK" message and snapped a foggy photo, then left at 3:30 PM — the start of my northward trek! At the summit I met another old-timer, Ol Man, age 74, who'd completed the trail in 2003. I was to share a couple of shelters with him.

Passing through the parking lot at 4:05, I walked carefully over the wet and somewhat rocky trail to the Stover Creek Shelter at 5:15 PM: the 2.8 mile point on the trail. (I'd therefore walked 3.7 miles that afternoon.) Ol Man was there, two Maine boys (aged 20-ish), a young long-haired man named Herb, and a bearded man already in his bag. (I heard later that he was a guide, and rushed along to meet his party.) I sacked between Herb and the guide on one side; capacity was probably 8 (4 on a side).

That first night seemed pretty cold. I was used to arising about 5:15 AM, and judged it to be about that from the slightly lightening sky — but it was 7:15! I was second only to the time-pressured guide to arise, and left my first shelter at 8:45 AM. I quickly adopted the trail-name habit: When one is asked one's name, the automatic response is one's trail name. Mine: Werdigo!

I continued to wear full rain gear, and mittens and wind hat, for warmth, and enjoyed the trail through largely deciduous woods (multi-toned brown leaves on the ground but none on the trees) with an occasional green fir (pine, usually). In many spots, despite my tenuous tendon (left Achilles tendinitis), I strode along at almost a normal pace. I stopped for lunch at the Hawk Mountain Shelter, finding Herb there doing the same. I took a photo of us there. He planned to camp somewhere south of Gooch Mountain Shelter, considering that too long a day. My lunch was the second half of last night's dinner, Backpackers' Pantry Chana Masala, and I left the stop at 12:45 PM.

At Hightower Gap (1:10 PM) I put the cord on my hat since it had become windy, and finished the ascent out of that gap at 1:30. An hour later I was down in Horse Gap, and by 3:10 was up out of it, back on level, rock-free and pleasant trail. On the descent to Cooper Gap I overtook a 66-year-old man scoping out a potential camping site. He was "All Small Stuff" (from the old saying "Don't sweat the small stuff... it's all small stuff"). He wore Vasque Breeze boots, as did I. We chatted a bit but my pace was a little faster so we moved apart. At Cooper Gap (4:00 PM) a sealed gallon of supermarket spring water awaited; I took 2 liters! Across the road a military tank truck (supplying military groups working in the area — we heard large guns being fired) offered potable water. Beside it, a college girl waited to be picked up: she'd sprained her ankle, altering her Spring Break plans.

Rising up out of Cooper Gap involved climbing Justus Mountain — it took about half an hour. By 5:10 I reached Justus Creek, where Herb planned to camp, and passed on through, reaching the Gooch Mountain Shelter at 6:12 PM. Ol Man and the two Maine boys were there. (With bags rated only to 45 degrees, during the Stover Creek night they'd done calisthenics for warmth, but at Gooch erected their small tent inside the shelter for warmth.) Herb showed up and tented nearby; others tenting included Rooster and his dog Bangarang, and a prematurely bald New York (Long Island) man whose name (from a grandchild), I later learned, was Pee Paw. It had been a 13 mile day for me (and all of us Stover's), pretty good for my first full day! Good boy: I did back stretches immediately upon arriving! Dinner was half of a Zucchini Lasagne (freeze-dried); I couldn't eat the whole 2-person thing.

Wednesday, March 13, involved a quandary: Most of us had planned to stay at the Woods Hole Shelter, but bear canisters were now required in the 5-mile corridor from Jarrard to Neels Gap and WHS is right in the middle of it. Herb and the Maine guys decided to camp at Lance Creek, the last good camping area before Jarrard. I arose at 7:18, left at 8:43, and enjoyed a beautiful morning of walking: smooth, leaf-covered path, sunny blue sky. Gooch Gap arrived about 9:30 AM. I still wore the wind hat and rain jacket, with cool wind. After shooting a few photos, I finally removed the Arc'Teryx rain jacket at 11:30 AM and arrived at Woody Gap about noon. Hiding from the wind in the men's room, I ate one of my pre-made tortilla-with-peanut-butter-and-Nutella "sandwiches" — oily and not very appealing; now, that was an experiment that didn't work! The sun was bright but wind gusts were cold; I departed the pleasant picnic area at 12:15 PM.

It took nearly an hour to climb out of Woody Gap, but the trail was pleasant to Lance Creek, where I arrived at 2:06 PM... too early to stop — besides, I'd never make Low Gap, my planned fourth night, from there. I plugged on... aware that

I was now committed to reach Neels Gap and uncertain of what I would find there.

Jarrard Gap came along at 3:40 PM: absolutely no bear-canister sign! I moved along, finding the walking pleasant, and took a 10-minute walk over to the Woods Hole Shelter where I found a small canister-requirement notice. I ate my second tortilla/PB-N greasy “sandwich” and was back on the AT by 5:02 PM. An hour later I was on the summit of Blood Mountain. It was a moderately tough climb. I'd seen nobody since at least Jarrard, and the skies were overcast with gusts of cold wind. After a couple of photos on the windswept, bald summit (where a surprising two-story stone Blood Mountain Shelter is located), I began slowly to wend my way down the rock summit, following white blazes painted on the rock. Coming down the north side, the blazes were faded and few, and at one point I got off-trail by following others' boot prints. A backtrack to the last blaze suggested the proper descent. It was on angled boulders, not welcome to a tenuous tendon! But at 7:42 PM I could see the highway through the trees, and at 7:46 arrived at Neels Gap, where the trail literally passes through Mountain Crossings Outfitters (a stone archway connecting its buildings).

Everything was dark and closed, so after sending my wife a SPOT message I set the Petzl to flashing and prepared for a 0.3 mile walk along the two-lane highway to cabins. Just then a man arrived — he had a key and papers, so I assumed he was the Mountain Crossings proprietor. He said the cabins were full, but that I could set up behind the shop. (I later learned that they were full, but the proprietor there was packing hikers in, on floors, to get them in out of the cold.)

Tired and relieved to have a place for the night, I ascended stone steps to a picnic area, finding an enclosed cabin tent with a child's happy voice, already there. I found a flat spot, in the dark, near a concrete picnic table, and extracted my 8x10 silicone tarp. Woah! I nearly lost it in the fierce, blustery wind. I got three foot stakes in, the main hiking pole and two front stakes in, and the center support cord, but had trouble tying one side lifting cord because of cold fingers. (The other side was against the table.) I didn't even consider changing into my camp clothes, but just donned my rain pants and Achilles night splint, then crawled into my bag, about 8:45 PM.

The night was frightening — not only very cold (I learned, later, 14 degrees F) but with severely gusting winds (later, I heard estimates of 60 to 70 mph). They sounded like a tornado to me: a loud roar, a short distance away, followed by wild flapping (Whack! Whack!) of the tarp, inches from my face. Some time in the night, the right front stake was pulled out, allowing the right (windward) side of the tarp actually to blow against my nose.

Despite all this, my 15-mile, Blood Mountain day left me so tired that I checked my watch only at 1:30 AM, 4:30 AM, and 7:30 AM (when I arose). Perhaps the scariest incident was after a mid-night call of nature: I was unable to grip the zipper tab to close the sleeping bag. Finally I did, of course, but the fear of being unable to close the bag was real and recalled to me tales of mountaineers.

Mountain Crossings opened at 8:30 AM and kindly allowed me to fold my tarp and organize my pack inside. (I'd just crammed everything in, up at the campsite.) The shop was busy. I was able to send my wife an email using the computer there, explaining that I had no cell phone coverage. After collecting my first mail-drop box and having a couple of cups of coffee and a banana, I bought some Platypus bottle caps and a new “space blanket” — I'd enjoyed some temporary warmth from the one I'd carried, wrapping it over myself inside the sleeping bag, but it tore almost immediately and I discarded it at the shop. With a relatively short day to my planned fourth-night stop, Low Gap, I left Mountain Crossings at 10:05 AM. That Wednesday night was a topic of discussion ever since (“Cold last night, but not like last Wednesday,” etc.). Spending it under my tarp was quite an experience.

Thursday's (March 14) walk began with icy water bottles and patches of ice along the trail. I realized why I'd had trouble stuffing the pack cover into its little stuff sack: It was damp and frozen! It was a cold but sunny day, generally pleasant walking. At 2:10 PM I'd descended to Tesnatee Gap, and was headed for the trail climbing out of it when a pickup truck, descending the adjacent highway, skidded to a stop on loose gravel. Its driver, a pleasant man with a trim beard, asked if I needed water or drinks. I thanked him but said “No.” After I told him of my day's destination, he said I had a long walk ahead; I told him my ETA was 6:30 PM. (It had been 5.5 miles in 4 hours from Neels, and it was another 5.5 miles to Low Gap Shelter.)

About 3:00 PM a pleasant young woman, Wild Rain, passed — friendly and nice. She's headed for Maine also. (I learned later that she'd done GA to PA before, but wanted to do the AT E2E so she restarted in Georgia! Strong hiker. Others later mentioned how charming she was.) At 3:09 I reached Hogpen Gap and began a long but smooth ascent of Poor Mountain. I thought I was at its top at 5:02, 5:20, and 5:27! I rolled into Low Gap Shelter at 6:00 PM, finding it full — actually, over-full — so I set up the tarp immediately behind the shelter.

That night (Thursday, March 14) was fairly comfortable, but I chose either a zero or short day Friday at Low Gap. There were 82 audio notes, from the past three days, accumulated on my Memorex recorder, so I spent the morning transcribing them into a waterproof yellow notebook and drinking coffee while others packed up and left. I finally pulled out at 12:22 PM, headed for the next (Blue Mountain) shelter, and met Chino, a 54-year-old ex-military man, just as I had returned to the AT at 12:30. He was moving fast but taking lunch at the shelter.

The trail ascended that afternoon but was smooth and pleasant; I could have been in shorts and T-shirt. The woods were pretty: wide vistas of bare deciduous trees sprinkled with the occasional fir. I took a few photos to show the nature of

the trail.

About 4:00 PM I met, coming toward me, Sourdough (Class of '06), Kimberley, and their dog, Action Jackson. He was very encouraging and urged me to look for his ten tips for a successful hike at Blue Mountain. I rolled in at 5:00 PM, after filling three 1-liter bottles at a trailside piped spring just a few minutes earlier. It had been a pleasant, albeit ascending, afternoon of hiking.

After my double portion of Wild West Chili, I sacked between Duct Tape (a young man who enjoyed marijuana) and Chino, with a young couple Fun Size (woman) and Bottle Cap (man) on Chino's other side. It was that evening that I heard the estimates of 14 degrees F and 60-70 mph wind for Wednesday night at Neels Gap, and that the cabins were packing hikers in. During the night I enjoyed fond remembrances of that delicious chili; the next morning, Chino good-naturedly commented that his remembrances of it were not so fond! (Our other shelter mates averred not to have noticed.)

From the Blue Mountain group I learned that Ron Haven does not pick up at Deep Gap, as I'd been thinking. My T-Mobile cell service continued not to work, but I have sent SPOT "OK" messages from Springer and each day's stopping point. Bottle Cap said relatives insisted that he and Fun Size carry one too, but bought them a much larger and heavier (8 oz) brand than SPOT. At Blue Mountain I met Blackhawk Bob (an ex-military helicopter pilot who got along famously with Chino, an ex-military bomber pilot), and Brian; they said Wild Rain passed through Friday afternoon.

I left the Blue Mountain Shelter at 8:20 AM, Saturday March 16, 2013. Half an hour later, as I crested a hill, I met Slow But Sure and her husband, Because Of Her. Slow snapped a photo with my camera (it didn't come out) of me with Pilgrim, a Vietnam veteran who, like me, was using an REI Flash 62 pack. I loved my pack, but Pilgrim had bought his online and even the Large size was too small for his long torso and caused him much shoulder pain; he was headed for Hiawassee for a new pack.

At 9:45 I removed my zip-off legs and hiking shirt, down to shorts and T-shirt in the hot sun. Fifteen minutes later I rolled into Unicoi Gap, finding a wonderful "trail magic" setup by Dave, Bob, and Andrew. Moonshiner (an older man with a trim gray goatee), Pilgrim, Bottle Cap and Fun Size were there, drinking cold beer! (Some added 110-proof liquor!) The trail angels replenished my supply of toilet paper; then I enjoyed some food and soft drink and I pulled out at 10:15, beginning the long climb out of Unicoi.

About an hour later I reached the peak and began descending, snapping a few photos of the view, trail, and myself, and at 12:23 PM emerged at Indian Grave Gap to find a second "trail magic" setup! This one was by the Glenlock Baptist Church — no beer or whiskey but tons of other things, even disposable razors! After a couple of photos and drinks, I enjoyed two hot-dog-roll-and-relish sandwiches (I'm a vegetarian), as I had at Unicoi, and pulled out at 1:18 PM, starting the climb out of this gap.

Again it took about an hour of ascending to finish the climb, but after only a short descent I came to a THIRD "trail magic" of the day, at Tray Gap! This one served hamburgers (the prior two had only hot dogs), and had "fixin's" of lettuce and tomatoes! I enjoyed two whole-grain hamburger rolls with lettuce, tomatoes, and mayonnaise, again skipped the beer (I drink an occasional one at home, but was unsure how I'd handle it on the hike), and headed out at 2:55 after a half-hour stop. I pulled into the Tray Mountain Shelter exactly one hour later.

Saturday night the shelter was full. I slept between Ridgerunner (a burly gray-bearded trail steward who covered all of Georgia's AT; I'd first met him at Stover on my first night out) and Alfalfa, a pleasant 14-year-old boy hiking with his father, an Iraq war veteran who was using a hammock behind the shelter. Triple Step, a spry Connecticut 70-year-old named for a dance step, slept to Ridgerunner's right; Blackhawk Bob and Bottle/Fun were tenting nearby, as were several others I'd met before. (Triple-Step puzzled me a bit. He referred several times to his wife, and I'm sure his assurances that he loved her were sincere, but he related to the group a detailed and carefully thought out plan to get away with murdering her. He would not have invested the effort to reason out that plan unless he enjoyed devising it... Diff'rent strokes, as the saying goes, but I can't imagine finding pleasure in devising a plot to murder a loved one. Triple-Step's trailjournal dot com post that his plan was "a lie" does not change my observation.)

Sunday, March 17, 2013 I arose at 7:11 AM and left Tray Mountain Shelter at 8:46, anticipating a long day. It was a pleasant morning; I saw a couple of squirrels and a small, narrow salamander, the first wildlife I've seen on the AT! A few birds, and, of course, the Justus Mountain hawks. At 10:30 AM I was back to shorts and T-shirt, and was moving well, smoothly and well-paced, on the pleasant dirt leaf-covered path. A couple of fast pair of youngsters passed, but my walking has been very much alone; sometimes an hour goes by, perhaps more, without encountering anyone else.

About 11:30 AM, I passed Bottle Cap, Fun Size, and Moonshiner, resting on a log. They have a short day planned, to Deep Gap Shelter. Moonshiner is having boot problems and will buy new ones in Hiawassee. Ten minutes earlier I'd passed the hurting Pilgrim — he could not possibly have had that pack fitted at an REI store. (As mentioned before, I learned that he'd bought his REI Flash 62 over the Internet.) I was cruising along, whistling Jelly Roll Morton's "The Pearls" and Joseph Lamb's "Contentment" rag, and feeling fine.

At 12:45 I finished a long ascent and snapped a photo, southwest, to give a sense of the view. A man with braided

black hair passed, moving fast, using another Flash 62, and we exchanged a few cordial words. At 1:55 I bopped past a "Vista" sign — one minute later I thought about Sourdough's tips and backtracked to it, snapping a couple of photos and returning to the AT at 2:10 PM! I'm glad I spent that 15 minutes — smiles not miles, smell the roses, etc.!

The path was smooth, well-packed dirt virtually all the way to Dicks Creek Gap, which I reached at 3:24 PM. It had been only 1:15 when I reached the Deep Gap Shelter, where Bottle/Fun planned to stay, far too short a day for me. (Blackhawk Bob, at 2:00 PM, reached the same conclusion.) The braided-hair man was at the Dicks Creek Gap road crossing's picnic tables; he'd passed me again perhaps 10 minutes earlier, having taken a break at Deep Gap. I asked if he had any potable water left — he was being picked up for a trip into Hiawassee — and he graciously used his Sawyer ceramic filter to get me 2L! He is Backtrack, tattooed all over, and it was a great pleasure to make his acquaintance. Blackhawk Bob soon arrived, also headed for Hiawassee. I photographed them as I left for Plumorchard Gap Shelter at 3:47 PM.

Cowert Gap arrived about an hour later, and the long climb resumed. I thought I'd reached the crest at 5:09, 5:36, and 5:55, and the last one seemed to be it! I descended to reach Plumorchard Gap at 6:26 PM, and six minutes down a steep blue-blazed side trail brought me to the shelter. Rooster (who I'd first met at Gooch Mountain Shelter Tuesday night) and his dog Bangarang were alone here, using a hammock behind the shelter; they had spent the day here (alone and lonely) to give the dog's hip a rest. A high-school senior named Josh arrived with me, but he hammock'ed that night too, so I had the entire 14-person shelter to myself! It had been a good 15.5 mile day, in 9:46! I may have had too much coffee after arriving — it was nearly 9:30 PM when I turned in, alone in that unique and large shelter. Josh was a nice young man; he's planning to start a SOBO end-to-end in late May and is just exploring sections of the trail now.

Monday, March 18 2013, I left Plumorchard Gap Shelter at 9:55 AM, heading north in a light rain, planning a short day to the Carter Gap Shelters. It was misty and overcast, visibility about 100 yards, and I hiked with full rain gear on. A pair of men headed south passed about 10:30, and a woman headed north. I shucked the rain gear at 11:20 and enjoyed about half an hour of pleasant walking, until rain, sleet, and a cold blustery wind made me regret removing the rain jacket. At 12:51 I met the GA/NC state line and snapped a couple of self-photos there! A real milestone! Like the Springer photo, it's a foggy, misty shot. At 1:00 PM Bly Gap arrived, still with sleet and cold, blustery wind. Occasional shelter was offered by clusters of evergreen trees or bushes with long, narrow, oval-shaped leaves; I was told later it was mountain laurel.

The trail climbed steeply in places, with an occasional rock scramble required, and the cold blustery sleet continued. I thought I was ascending Courthouse Bald, but it came later. Climbing a steep section about 1:30 PM, I met a bushy-bearded large man descending toward me, in a red poncho; he was this section's "Ridgerunner," a cordial and friendly man who asked me about shelter registers (There weren't many!) and said I'd have no trouble making Muskrat Creek by my 4:00 PM ETA. I came to Sassafras Gap at 2:20 PM (and wondered if those oval-leaved trees were sassafras!) and arrived at the Muskrat Creek Shelter at 2:55 PM, well before my ETA. Finding no bear cables, I strung my bear rope before changing clothes.

The extra time allowed for some writing, in which I noted a change in my planned schedule. Instead of 16.6 and 15.3 mile days to Rock Gap Shelter (Plumorchard to Beech Tenting to Rock Gap), I was doing 7.3, 12.5, and 12.1 miles (to Muskrat, Carter Gap, and Rock). Much more reasonable! I shared Muskrat with Mozyin, Atlas and Scott, and others — it was a tough, cold, rainy night. Two fellows slept on their tarp, on the ground under the roof that covered the picnic table. "Atlas" is a geographer, often feels as if her pack is the weight of the world, and is a Scottish-descended lass on the AT! That makes her name almost as good as my Werdigo!

My notes report that I threw out 4 tortilla/PB-Nutella things at the Indian Grave Gap trail-magic stop, and that "This is tough! I can understand why 20% drop out at Neels Gap!" Many of the Muskrat Creek group resupplied in Hiawassee, and walked that day from Dicks Creek Gap. A few, besides me, are headed for Franklin in a couple of days. It was nice to meet Mozyin, a retired corporate lawyer who has homes in Missouri (MO) and Indiana (IN), and claims to move slowly! I told him and Scott/Atlas that my name, besides being the question neighbors ask my wife ("Where'd he go?"), has a literary connection. Neither they, nor anyone else so far, has known it!

Tuesday morning (March 19, 2013), I left Muskrat Creek about 8:30 AM, with fingers so cold I could barely work the Memorex recorder. A small older man, Sandals, passed, as did Atlas and Scott, about 10:00 AM. Ascending along the west side of a ridge, we were somewhat out of the wind, so about 10:30 I removed my rain jacket, mittens, and wind hat. Deep Gap arrived at 11:00 AM, and the trail began to follow an old woods road. It constantly ascended, but at an easy grade and relatively free of rocks. I reached Standing Indian Shelter at 11:40 and walked on by, in bright cool sun.

About 12:40 PM, after I noted that I seemed to be getting up pretty high, I reached the summit of the 5,498' Standing Indian Mountain. (Actually, it was 0.1 mile off the trail, and I didn't go to it.) A pleasant descent then began. I passed Sandals, applying Moleskin to his feet, at 2:00 PM, and rolled into the new Carter Gap Shelter at 3:40 PM, finding Mozyin there and Phoenix tenting nearby. We all dried our clothes and bags in the hot sun, burning off Muskrat Creek's dampness. We again had to use bear ropes — no cables here either. I had so little food that Mozyin let me add mine to his (one dinner and one snack left!).

It was a cold night. Phoenix, the young man in his tent, reported feeling as if he had slept in 10- or 20-minute periods, then rolled over with a few minutes of wakefulness — exactly my feeling. Mozyin did a bit better; he apologized for snoring, but I honestly told him I was happy to hear it because it indicated that one of us, anyway, was sleeping! There was ice on our water when we arose.

I left the Carter Gap Shelter about 9:00 AM, Wednesday March 20, 2013, and an hour later snapped a shot of a spectacular east-facing overlook. My Memorex recorder had stopped working; Register C had 99 zero-length recordings and the device showed “Full.” Warming it in my shirt pocket, and resetting it by removing and replacing the batteries, allowed me to delete the false recordings and (briefly) resume its use. At 10:45 I noted ice crystals, like tiny stalagmites, at the edges of the trail, and found ice in my water hose.

About then, the recorder stopped working again, and I made few written notes. The trail ascended sharply, up rocky scrambles reminding me of Adirondack mountains with sharp drop-offs to the right. At 12:05 PM the steepness had abated, and I noticed white through the trees. Anticipating a utility building like those found on the summits of some northern mountains, I followed a short open path to find a large RV! Phoenix was there, with two people at a campfire! Fishing Fred and his wife Sue gave me an orange and a soda, and showed me an old Indian campsite near a ledge, where we took photos. Grateful for Fred's “trail magic,” I left at 12:30 PM for more steep ascent, and reached the Albert Mountain fire tower at 1:05 PM.

Phoenix was there, and a backpacking couple I hadn't met before. I depacked, climbed the stairs until a gate blocked access, and took some photos. After a brief lunch, I left at 1:20 PM, beginning a smooth pleasant descent on a broad path, perhaps an old road. I saw bear cables for the Big Spring Shelter (but neither the shelter itself nor a sign to it) at 1:45, and the brand-new Long Branch Shelter at 2:35 PM. I rolled into the Rock Gap Shelter at 4:20 PM. Mozyin and Phoenix (who was tenting again) were there, and there was a horizontal bear cable but no descending hooked cables so we slung our own ropes over the horizontal cable. My bag had only garbage anyway!

That Wednesday was another tough night. I'd placed my space blanket on top of the Z-Rest, under the sleeping bag, and was not very cold during the night. But a 5:30 AM privy run, in my Crocs, found SNOW on the ground, and all water bottles frozen solid. I later heard 13 degrees F reported that night. Nearly everyone planned a run into Franklin, and left around 7:45 AM, heading 3.5 miles up the trail to Winding Stair Gap for Ron Haven's shuttle. My plan was to pick up that shuttle at Rock Gap, about 0.1 mile down through the trees (we could see the road from the shelter), and I was very nervous to be left alone by 8:00 AM! Was I wrong in anticipating a shuttle stop at Rock Gap? I'd been unable to telephone Budget Inn to confirm a Rock Gap shuttle.

On a frigid, snowy and windy Thursday morning, March 21, 2013, by 8:00 AM I was alone at the Rock Gap Shelter; everyone else had hustled out to make the 3.5 miles to Winding Stair Gap for Ron Haven's shuttle. It seemed as if I was alone in believing he picked up at Rock Gap, and I was very anxious about that. I quickly packed up and hustled down to the parking area, reached about 8:35 AM. I figured that if I was wrong, I could hitch into Franklin... but absolutely no vehicles passed! I was utterly alone, pacing loops around the parking area to keep warm and hoping for a van or bus to appear. It was sunny and clear, but very cold and quite windy. To my huge delight, Ron's van appeared about 9:15 AM. After a swing by Wallace Gap, we filled it at Winding Stair and were at Franklin's Budget Inn by about 10:45 AM!

Although the Budget Inn is hardly fancy, dating from the 1950s, I was delighted to land in Room 4, actually a two-room, two-bath, efficiency. After unpacking in the dining-kitchen room, I walked down Pearl Street, looking for a lunch spot, and found Caffe Rel, a great restaurant only perhaps a 5-minute walk from Budget. After a Greek salad, I wandered farther and found a Subway (cheese foot-long) and a Dollar General (milk, cheese, chips, writing tablet...). That afternoon I worked on a writeup of my first 10 days, then walked up to Main Street and Franklin's central business district. At Outdoor 76 I bought a sleeping-bag liner and two fuel canisters. My dinner that evening was again at Caffe Rel, but I had arrived late and felt as if I was being rushed out (“Don't feel rushed,” the young man told me, as he mopped the floor and flipped chairs on top of tables...). I planned on tomorrow morning's Baptist Church all-you-can-eat free pancake breakfast.

Friday, March 22 2013, I was in the Budget Inn parking lot at 7:25 AM for the church van pickup... but discovered it had come and gone at 7:15! Rats. But I had a \$10 coupon for Sunset Restaurant, given to me by Outdoor 76 for spending over \$50 (I think it was), so I walked about a mile on a pleasant cool morning to enjoy pancakes there! I completed my writeup of the hike's Springer-to-Franklin section and walked to the Post Office to mail it to my wife, stopping again at the Subway and Dollar General. That evening, still satisfied from the sub, I had only another Caffe Rel Greek salad.

Saturday, March 23 2013, I packed up, then caught the Church van at 7:15 AM, enjoying a table with Pilgrim (leaving the trail due to back problems; he'd purchased a new pack but the damage had been done), Slow But Sure and Because Of Her, and others. A volunteer worker snapped our photos, printed them out, and the Church mailed them (with our personalized notes) in envelopes we addressed! What a nice service. We were back at the Budget at 8:30 AM, in time for Ron's 9:00 AM shuttle back to the trailheads. Many got off at Winding Stair Gap, but of course I had to begin my day at Rock Gap.

Without a functional audio recorder my notes and recollections are a bit sparse, but I left Rock Gap at 9:50 AM and

reached the Winding Stair Gap highway crossing at 11:50 AM. (I snagged two excellent oranges from a trail-magic box near the end of the descent to the Gap!) After a plod up the rise out of the Gap, I reached the turn to Siler Bald Shelter at 2:05 PM — earlier than I'd expected, but the next shelter was too far so I pulled off the AT and onto the blue-blazed side trail to the shelter. A half-mile later (Aieeee!), I arrived at the shelter: 2:35 PM or so. It was nearly full, the party of six twenty-somethings I had and would encounter often; I got spot 7 in the 8-person shelter. Lunch was two hot-dog rolls (two of them pack very neatly into each Croc sandal!) with Dollar General pimiento cheese spread, and dinner one of my Backpacker Pantry freeze-drieds. About 3:30 PM I'd sent a SPOT "OK" message to my family.

Sunday morning, March 24 2013, I left the Siler Bald Shelter at 8:35 AM and reached the AT at 8:53, turning north. I was a bit surprised to see, at 9:15 AM, a "Siler Bald Shelter" sign, but remembered that it is on a loop trail: I'd approached the shelter from the south end of the loop, and if I'd continued past it this morning would have met the AT here, at the loop's north end. At 10:06 one of the young party's members, Cinnamon, asked me to photograph him at Siler Bald — I did, but the mist and overcast dissuaded me from bothering with my own photo.

Cinnamon was having heel trouble, apparently duct-taping pieces of cloth padding to his right heel, so I passed him now and then, but we arrived pretty much together at the old stone Wayah Bald Fire Tower, where we took some photos and had lunch. My stop was from 12:50 to 1:15 PM. I reached the Wayah Bald Shelter about 2:00 PM, just stopping to say hello to a few fellows who were staying there. There was some trail confusion; a "shelter" sign appeared at 1:43, then another about 2:00! I was wool-gathering at one point when the trail took a sharp V-turn, and I couldn't recall which leg I'd come down! Neither, by my compass, was exactly north, but both were sort-of north. I was rather upset to come to that "shelter" sign again... but another hiker confirmed that it was a different sign (though both for Wayah Bald!). He'd been confused too. Well, it was a pleasant, smooth and relatively rock-free path, so no harm was done. I actually did not backtrack after all, and guessed correctly about the leg of the V that constituted progress!

Cinnamon and I reached Burningtown Gap at 3:50 PM, but he was moving fast, and when I reached Cold Spring Shelter at 4:33 he was among the group of six twenty-somethings who filled it. It included Rooster and Tallulah (the new trail name of one of the Maine boys with whom I'd shared Stover on our first night out).

About an hour later, after one false start on sloping ground among other tenters just north of the shelter on the west side of the trail, I erected the tarp on a ridge east of the trail, uphill from a "Camping" sign. (While the convenient west-side camping area held several tents, I was alone up on the high, windy hill.) After a quick freeze-dried dinner prepared down at the shelter, I hustled back to my own little camp and crawled in. Surprised to find cell service, I called my wife from inside the tarp, just as rain began.

Ah, if rain were the only problem! It turned very cold that night, and we had several inches of snow when I arose about 7:15 AM. During the night, I'd noticed that it had become increasingly difficult to raise my feet (the left one in the Achilles "night splint," of course) to roll over. In the morning I realized why: I was also lifting a couple of pounds of snow! I was glad I'd been doing my back-stretch routine, with its several ab-strengthening exercises, because the abs got a workout that night.

Immediately a major problem appeared: I couldn't get my food bag down! I'd used the "Pacific Crest Trail" system that doesn't tie the rope to a tree, so cutting the food down wasn't an option. The knots were frozen, and in the ~10 degree F air temperature my fingers weren't nimble enough to pick them apart. I truly feared having to leave four days' food hanging in the air. Eventually, enough patient picking pulled the knot apart and down came the bag. The same issue recurred with the tarp-to-tree ropes, but with the same eventual resolution. My water bottles were frozen solid, but after packing up I obtained about ½ L from the shelter's spring; that would last the day! I was not at all unhappy to leave that Cold Spring site at 9:10 AM. Tough night — I took two photos of the morning tarp.

When I left my snowy, frozen Cold Spring tarp site at 9:10 AM on Monday, March 25 2013, I violated one of my cardinal rules: I did not exchange my dry and relatively clean "camp" clothes for my hiking clothes before heading out. (This swap would have meant, simply, removing my long-sleeved polypro top and long-legged polypro bottom and exchanging underwear and T-shirt for those I'd been hiking in.) My only excuse is that I planned to be at the Bryson City Nantahala Outdoor Center's (NOC's) bunkroom that night. The party of six, and many of the tenters, had left early, so I gratefully followed their prints in the snow-covered trail. It was a bit slippery, but I was careful and slow, relying heavily on my poles, and didn't fall. A party soon passed — they'd been tenting west of the trail at Cold Spring — led by PeePah, the jovial and stocky Long-Island man with the broad New York City accent, who I'd first met at Gooch Mountain on my second night out. He cautioned me not to push for the NOC, for which everyone was headed, if I didn't feel comfortable. I appreciated his concern; he began his advice with "Hmmm... hiking alone..."

With caution on slippery rocky ascents, the morning passed all right, and I was surprised to emerge, unexpectedly (guess I wasn't paying attention!) at the Wesser Bald Fire Tower at 12:30 PM. I took a short off-trail path to the right (mindful of Sourdough's ten tips!) and met a young man and his son, who were ascending another access road to the tower. The young man photographed me with (at my request) his charming little boy Ty, with naught but mist all around. He and Ty ascended the tower, but I drew the line at that (Sorry, Sourdough!) since visibility was about 300 yards.

I had a very cold (and waterless) lunch with a couple of other hikers at the Wesser Bald Shelter from 1:00 to 1:40 PM, then moved on. My original goal that day had been the A. Rufus Morgan Shelter, just a mile south of the NOC. When I arrived there at 4:30 PM, it was empty! That would NEVER have happened were it not for the NOC's proximity! I actually considered staying there, alone in a shelter... but left at 4:42, arriving at the large NOC complex at 5:04, and safely ensconced in the "Overflow" building's Room #2 at 5:33 PM. Condor, a fast-moving ~54-year-old who'd whipped past me before Morgan, was there, and soon Brad, who Condor had met on the trail, joined us. NOC stopped admitting new guests at 7:00 PM; it was just us 3 in a 4-person room that night. We trundled over to the River's End Restaurant, where I had a veggie pizza and a brownie topped with ice cream, and we were in bed and pretty much asleep by 9:30 PM.

I should back up a little to say a bit about the trail between the Wesser Bald and Rufus Morgan shelters. Some of it traversed a high, narrow ridge, with deep valleys to the immediate left and right — it was quite disconcerting! I kept my eyes on my feet and the next couple of steps, and tried to ignore the less-immediate scene. The ridge would get more and more narrow, the steep left and right drop-offs getting closer and closer. Where they finally met, at the end of the ridge, the trail dropped down over steep boulders, dusted with ice and snow, to a lower level where, several times, the process began again. It seemed a bit like walking on an icy deck toward the prow of a long, narrow ship, then climbing down it to the next lower deck. The short, steep descents to the new levels required careful thinking before placing weight on feet and poles. Several times a drop of perhaps 15' like that was followed by another narrow path and then another such descent. It was not comfortable to be doing that alone! My thoughts turned to PeePah and his concern about me. That night we met him at the River's End Restaurant. As Condor, Brad, and I entered, PeePah (seated with his group) waved warmly to me, and as he was leaving he stopped by, shook my hand, and said he'd been worried about me on the afternoon's rocky ridges! What a nice man! (By the way, I never fell. Among all the hikers I've spoken with, I'm the only one who can say that. One girl said she'd fallen a dozen times.)

Tuesday, March 26 2013, found snow falling outside the Overflow #2 window at the Bryson City NOC. Brad and Condor had come from Wayah Bald Shelter yesterday, much farther than me, and were planning 16-mile days to the Brown Fork Gap Shelter today. My more modest plan to reach Fontana, formulated in Franklin, called for 6.7 miles to the Sassafras Gap Shelter today, 9.1 miles to Brown Fork tomorrow, and 11.5 miles down to Fontana on Thursday March 28, the first day of my Lodge reservation.

I pulled out about 8:45 AM, and shucked the full rain gear partway up the long climb out of the river valley. I was overtaken by a friendly man, Tenderfoot, who was younger (36) and stronger than me. He could easily have outdistanced me but liked my pace, saying it was a good one for his weak ankle; he stayed with me nearly all day, pausing to wait if he got ahead and catching up if he got behind.

Notes are sparse because of the demise of the Memorex and weather that discouraged manual note-taking, but it was a tough day of walking, with snow making blazes impossible to see. Everyone had talked of pushing 20 miles to Fontana, so Tenderfoot and I had hopes of a clear shelter at Sassafras Gap, but both levels were jammed with side-to-side bags, two hammocks were strung over the covered picnic table, and a couple of tents, set on snow, were erected nearby. We'd arrived about 2:30 PM, plenty early, we thought. Brad and Tenderfoot set up tents. Tallulah (one of the Stover Creek Maine boys), perhaps familiar with my tarp and taking pity, persuaded his lower-level neighbors to make room for me to set up perpendicular to the lower-level bags, across their feet, on the couple of feet of space between the bags and the front edge of the sleeping platform. I gratefully did, and simply had to be careful not to roll off at night. Tallulah later estimated that we had 20 people in that shelter, plus about 4 tents (including Brad's and Tenderfoot's).

I was one of the earlier departures on Wednesday, March 27, 2013, from the Sassafras Gap Shelter. Tenderfoot called out, "Werdigo! When are you leaving?," wanting to stick together again, but I'd already changed into my hiking clothes (that is, removed my polypro bottom and long-sleeved shirt, and my NorthFace wind shirt, and changed T-shirts) and he hadn't even disassembled his tent yet, so I said "Sorry, I'm freezing, you'll catch me soon enough" and departed.

It was good not to have been the first to leave, though! Tallulah and Thunderfoot (a young man with a spectacular red beard and an occasional slight stutter), I think, were the first out, and had to "break trail." This, not in the Yukon but on the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina in late March! Blown snow stuck to trees, obliterating the famous white blazes, and the fellows often had to guess, based on terrain and tree spacing, where the trail was. I reached Cheoah Bald, with a spectacular overlook, about 9:00 AM, and snapped a self-photo, but with my short tripod on the ground it shows none of the view. One hiker that day reported a drift up to his waist; Tenderfoot (who caught up to me shortly after 9 AM) and I found them up to our knees. We walked in a blustery cold wind, blowing across ridges, that almost blotted out our predecessors' tracks.

The trail, once it came down off the ridges, became icy and very slippery. We relied heavily on our poles, exercising special care when traversing rock slides, with jumbled angled rock faces and ankle-twisting gaps between them. Tenderfoot and I wondered how Brad could handle these sections, as he had no poles. (We also wondered at Condor's plan to make Brown Fork from the NOC in one day.)

Tenderfoot and I reached Simp Gap at 12:15 PM and stopped along the trail for lunch partway up out of the gap,

from 12:25 to 12:55 PM. We descended, over a path that was often quite pleasant, to a large highway (Rt. 143) at Stecoah Gap. As Tenderfoot began to search for a water source, Brad came down the trail! On one of the rocky icy down steps that morning he had, indeed, taken a hard fall, and in the woods found a branch that made a large sturdy staff. He and I crossed the highway to begin the long ascent out of the Gap, leaving Tenderfoot searching for the water source mentioned in the trail guide. Tenderfoot had been trying to persuade me to bypass Brown Fork and camp along the trail, to reduce tomorrow's drop down into Fontana. He was quite strong in this view, but with two nights reserved at the Lodge I had no special need to get in early; we parted ways at Stecoah Gap.

That was a long, steep climb! But the path was smooth dirt, with no rock scrambling, and the east-facing hill caught the warm sun so we found almost no snow. Brad passed me almost as soon as we left the highway, at 2:00 PM, but I passed him as he worked on his pack shortly before the side trail to the Brown Fork Gap Shelter. Only Tallulah was there when I rolled in at 3:45 PM; the rest of his six-person group (Rooster, Novi, etc.) had gone ahead while he stayed to dry his clothes and gear in the hot sun. Brad never did show up; he camped farther along the trail. Tallulah and I, alone for a while, had a nice conversation and were able to reach our respective families by cell phone. The shelter gradually filled up, though, and we had a full night, plus a few tents (including Thunderfoot's). It seemed cold, but a little water left in my Platypus bag did not freeze.

Thursday morning, March 28 2013, found me with no breakfasts, so I saved a couple of minutes on my departure time! I was second to leave, behind a hard-charger named Rock, but had to move slowly over icy trails: The sun had done some melting, but where hikers had walked the snow was hard-packed and had even become ice. I removed my poles' rubber tips. Tallulah and Thunderfoot soon passed me, as (eventually) did everyone else! But, still, I never fell. Around 12:15 PM I joined a few young thru-hikers having lunch at Cable Gap Shelter, and took a couple of photos. We then began, with Werdigo bringing up the rear of course, the 5.5 mile trek down to Fontana.

Mercy, but that trail was maddening! I'd lost my GA-line-to-Fontana map and related guidebook pages somewhere south of Sassafras Gap, so I had to rely on the blazes. Apparently the trail makes long switchbacks descending the west side of a high ridge down to the level of the lake. So... this supposedly northbound descending walker often found himself walking uphill and south! I often wondered if I'd missed a turn and was backtracking over trail I'd already walked! "Believe your compass" is generally a good rule, but I had a feeling about those switchbacks, and eventually came to a sharp turn with a professional, official sign: "AT North," it read, pointing compass South, and its "AT South" arrow pointed compass North! I gratefully continued to walk northbound on the trail (south, by my compass!) and finally, about 3:45 PM, wound up at the shuttle call phone at a rest-room building just off Route 28.

In less than 10 minutes I was enjoying the chance to sit down, riding in the Lodge's Subaru SUV! By 4:15 PM, I was in my room, 246 in Garden Building A. I looked forward to two "zero" days, having added a third night to my stay, and immediately telephoned my wife, begging her to get my Microspikes to the Post Office before 5:00 PM for overnight shipping to me at the Lodge. There was no cell coverage at Fontana, so I had to use the Lodge's in-room telephone for which a charge was levied. There was also no restaurant except that of the Lodge, so any meal not pulled out of one's pack or cobbled together from the grocery store had to be purchased there. The meals, and my stay overall, were fine, but my final bill was about twice what the room itself cost. I have no notes about Thursday's dinner; I believe it was a quiet meal, eaten alone in the restaurant.

After a pleasant first night at Fontana Lodge, Friday morning (March 29, 2013) I walked over to the main building for breakfast (a nice cheese omelet) and returned to the room. At 9:00 AM, when his office opened, I telephoned my doctor to ask for help with my right knee. Lodge personnel had already informed me how to obtain medicine from the nearest pharmacy, Kerr's in Robbinsville, so I called Jeff Hoch of Hikers' Inn. For \$50 he picked up the prescribed steroid pack, and it was waiting for me at the desk at 2:00 PM when I returned from the laundromat and General Store. Also waiting for me was a nice new Olympus digital audio recorder from my wife, my own mail-drop box, and a "care package" from my daughter and her husband with additional food and foil-packaged hand and foot warmers! I must have told them about the 13 degree nights, snowy trails, and warnings about snow and ice in the Smokies!

One reason for the extra "zero" at Fontana was to rest my right knee. Besides starting on my home doctor's prescribed steroid (anti-inflammatory) treatment, I tried to RICE it as much as possible (rest, ice, compression, elevation). It would have been better not to have to walk uphill to another building to obtain ice and soft drinks, but the machines in Garden Building A were not functional, and the public computer, restaurant, and main desk were also in the main building. The Lodge provided no in-room coffee, so I "brewed" instant on the Pocket Rocket. Some time during the day, as I was waiting to use the public computer up in the lobby, I met Tenderfoot. He was staying a couple of nights at the Lodge, to visit with his brother who worked at the Dam.

As I was finishing dinner Friday night, I noticed some of my hiking friends at a large circular table: Backtrack, Blackhawk Bob, Herb (now "Two Sticks"), and Turtletracks. There were a couple of other thru-hikers whom I did not know. They invited me to join them and I did, for an enthusiastic toast to "Fontana!" I sure wish I'd had my camera with me.

Saturday, March 30 2013, was not quite a "zero," but almost; at 1½ miles, I'd barely call it even a "nero"

(near-zero)! After breakfast in the restaurant (another nice cheese omelet), some work on the pack, and starting to crawl up the learning curve of the new Olympus recorder, I arranged for a shuttle ride (\$3) to Fontana Dam — the actual dam, I mean — arriving there about 11:00 AM. Wanting to start the next stage of my hike there, I needed to pick off the 1½ mile or so between it and Route 28. It was also a test of my knee, a smooth trail on a beautiful day with no pack. I stopped to see the “Fontana Hilton,” a great 20-person shelter, where I chatted briefly with Flipper; an aspiring farmer who I’d met before (he firmly believes machinery makes us poorer by throwing people out of work) and is leaving the trail soon. Farther toward 28 I met Camel (a pleasant young man who I’ve met before; he knew my name) and Pumpkin King, heading north with their full packs. At the Rt. 28 parking lot the shuttle (for another \$3) promptly returned me to the Lodge.

At the Lodge that afternoon I obtained the Great Smoky Mountain National Park backcountry-camping pass, using the public computer, grateful to Blackhawk Bob for pointing out the difference between the receipt for payment and the actual pass itself. Tenderfoot was using the machine too, so we chatted a bit. It was a delight to meet Slow But Sure and Because Of Her at the Lodge; it had probably been a week since we’d first met on the trail. I must have mentioned my concern about my food supply being inadequate for the Smokies, because she said they had too much and offered me their extras! I was touched by Slow’s kind offer, but a more careful inventory of my own drop box, my daughter’s supplement, and a couple of bags from the fine, well-stocked General Store, indicated I was in good shape. I spent some of the day RICE’ing, using a black neoprene knee brace that had been given to me by a man at breakfast Friday. (Hearing him talk of airports, I’d asked about them, worried I’d have to bail due to my knee. He said Knoxville was closest, but offered to give me one of his knee braces, summarily rejecting my offer of modest payment.)

Sunday morning I met Slow and Because at breakfast in the restaurant. They were considering another zero at the Lodge — I believe they’d arrived after me. They very kindly invited me to join them, but I wanted to plan my day’s hike, studying the map and guidebook, so I begged off in what I hope was an inoffensive manner. They were so kind I’d feel bad if I hurt their feelings. I don’t think I did, because Slow came over a short time later and asked if she could take my photograph! I wish I had one of her and Because.

Sunday, March 31 2013, I was dropped off at the dam at 8:50 AM (another \$3!), carrying about 9 days of food for probably a 42 lb pack. In cool pleasant weather I walked across the impressive dam and up a road, picking up the forest trail and the Great Smoky Mountain National Forest permit box at 9:26 AM. I wore the black neoprene sleeve on my right knee, but have no way of knowing if it helped. The sign at the permit box said 9.9 miles to the Mollie Ridge Shelter.

The long ascent from the dam to the ridge was in warm, muggy weather; I considered shorts and T-shirt but anticipated cooler weather at higher elevations. It was a nice day for hiking. Shortly after 10:00 AM I snapped a self-photo with Fontana Lake below, and about 11:30 was passed by a friendly young man named Hammer. (He complimented my steady pace; we were to see each other several times later.) Shortly before noon I passed the Shuckstack fire tower, and at noon stopped for lunch at an intersection with the Benton McKay Trail. It was about 6 miles to the shelter, I figured.

The afternoon trail was generally pleasant, smooth and covered with leaf duff. Shortly after 1:00 PM, as another young man overtook me, a southbound “Ridgerunner,” some kind of ranger I guess, asked about our permits — just whether we’d had any trouble getting them, whether we’d deposited the bottom sections in the box, and our home states. (The young man’s was Pennsylvania.) He said Mollie and the next two shelters were empty, and that the next two (beyond Mollie) were easy to walk to — he seemed to be encouraging us to go on beyond Mollie.

The day brightened a bit, and at 2:00 PM I could see my shadow on the ground. There were a few patches of snow in the woods, just a few square feet each, and at 2:20 PM I photographed the trail ahead. But light rain began, and continued until I rolled in to the Mollie Ridge Shelter at 3:45 PM. Backtrack, Turtletracks, and Two Sticks (Herb) were also there that night, which was warm and pleasant. I actually removed my bag liner, unnecessary in the relative warmth. This shelter is known for its exposure to wind; for protection, its open face was covered by large tarpaulins. In my home territory, the Adirondacks, this is forbidden, but it seemed to be common in the Smokies.

April Fools’ Day, Monday April 1 2013, began with my 8:15 AM departure from the Mollie Ridge Shelter. We were warned by a SOBO to expect snow everywhere north of Mollie, but the day was bright and sunny and cool, perhaps about 50°F. A 9:20 AM photo shows the trail. Russell Field Shelter arrived at 10:05 (not much longer than the Ridgerunner’s 1:30 estimate from Mollie... I was proud!), and Spence Field at 11:48. I stopped at Spence for water and lunch, sent a SPOT message to my family, and pulled out at 12:25 PM. (The “fields” were open areas with long grasses of some kind — brownish-yellow at this time of year. I later took a photo of such an area.)

After lunch the dominant task was the ascent of Thunderhead Mountain. I thought I’d reached its summit, trudging up one slow step at a time, at 1:30, but later decided that rise was not even noted in my trail guide! At 1:45 I noted that I was descending down off the mountain, but that was just the guidebook’s “rocky outcropping”; at 1:56 I finally reached and photographed the Geodesic Survey brass bolt (elevation 5527’) at Thunderhead’s summit. At 2:35 PM I encountered another bolt, this one at 5,040’ elevation. The trail turned a bit less rocky, welcome because those rocky ascents were tough on my right knee.

I knew the Derrick Knob Shelter was just over a peak, after ascending from a gap, so at every little gap and its

subsequent rise I'd anticipated the shelter. This gap/rise combo seemed to occur time after time — it was rather discouraging. Finally at 4:24 PM I met a "Sugartree Gap 4435'" sign; my map showed one more mile and 500' elevation gain to the shelter. I chugged in shortly after 5:00 PM; Backtrack was there, but Turtletracks and Two Sticks were still behinds us, on the trail.

It was colder that night, but water bottles inside the tarp-enclosed shelter did not freeze, though there was ice on the path down to the water source in the morning. Some shelter-mates, including Backtrack and Two Sticks, were planning a 13.5 mile day, over Clingman's Dome, but not me! The woman beside whom I'd slept, a 62-year-old retiree named Tina, had come only from Spence Field yesterday and, like me, was headed only the 6.2 miles to the Double Spring Gap Shelter, the last shelter before we NOBOs reached Clingman's.

Tuesday, March 2 2013, was to be a short day so I left Derrick Knob late, at 10:05 AM, finding the trail pleasant but the weather a bit cool. At noon I stopped for lunch (and to send a SPOT message) at what I think was Buckeye Gap, and snapped a couple of photos of this pleasant area; I sure hope the azure blue sky is evident! From 2:00 to 2:10 I had a quick snack at the Siler Bald Shelter; Tina and Pop-pop (another name assigned by a grandchild) were relaxing there in the sun. Around 2:45 I crested a ridge and took South and North landscape shots. The northbound photo seemed to show scattered fir trees on otherwise bare slopes, looking very strange; eventually I realized they were simply fir trees in a dense deciduous woods that, at this time, bore no leaves. A closer look revealed some of those leafless deciduous trees.

It was only 3:15 PM when I pulled into Double Spring Gap Shelter. The AT is on the NC/TN state line for many miles along here, and at this shelter there is a NC spring in front of the shelter and a TN spring behind it! Tina and Pop-pop rolled in a bit later, but — incredibly, to me — Backtrack and Two Sticks, who were here about 2:00 PM, chose to continue another 7 miles, over Clingman's to the next shelter! They were eager to reach Gatlinburg, I think. Tina and I were neighbors again in the shelter that night; with my thin Z-Rest and 32° bag, I envied her air mattress and thick puffy bag.

With yet another short day planned, my Wednesday (April 3, 2013) began with an 8:45 AM departure from the Double Spring Gap Shelter. I was the last NOBO hiker to leave, but a SOBO man was having a leisurely breakfast. He warned me of icy trails and said I'd be very glad I had Microspikes.

The battery in my new Olympus recorder failed about 9:15 AM, but there was little of note on that short morning anyway, except the icy trail and ascent toward Clingman's, the highest point on the Appalachian Trail. I passed Tina, who was taking a snack break, and proceeded on, delighted with the Microspikes. (Tina, unfortunately, had no such devices, and was slipping and sliding a lot.) At 10:24 I met the bypass trail to the Clingman's parking lot, and about 10:50 emerged onto the paved sidewalk to the tower, stopping briefly to remove the 'spikes. At 11:00 AM, exactly my ETA, I was among many tourists and day-trippers on the observation deck of the spectacular fire tower! Tina arrived at 11:06.

The wind was stiff and cold but the view, in all directions, was spectacular. I was completely unprepared for, and surprised by, the attention paid to me as a thru-hiker. A man immediately offered to take my photo, and several others asked politely and with genuine interest about my hike. Tina and I photographed each other. The southbound view identified Cheoah Bald, on which I'd photographed myself on a snowy morning a week or so ago, but I could not identify it. Tina and I tried my monocular — she looked for the Shuckstack Fire Tower — but we could not identify landmarks other than the massive Fontana Lake.

I found my wife's extra AAA for the Olympus and ate my lunch, departing shortly after Tina at 11:30 AM. It was only about 3 miles to the Mount Collins Shelter.

What a three miles, though! The trail was nearly solid ice, snow walked upon and packed by hikers and shaded from the sun. I soon overtook poor Tina, who was having a lot of trouble with the icy descents. Shortly before 1:00PM I met three people day-hiking toward me; the young teenaged boy had a "Cross Country" shirt that identified a county near my home town. We chatted for a moment; I told him XC was a great sport, and moved on. About 1:30 PM, as the path was ascending parallel to the Clingman's Dome Road, I snapped a photo of the Clingman's fire tower, barely visible even at 8x magnification — I was there only two hours ago! (I later learned that many hikers, especially if they lacked traction devices, cut over to that road and walked down it, all the way to Newtown Gap.)

I finally thought to snap a photo of that icy trail, by this time fairly level but still thick uneven ice, simply to give an idea of what we had to cope with. The ½-mile trail to Mount Collins Shelter came along at 2:11, and the shelter itself at 2:25 PM. It was empty, but Two Sticks (Herb) had left a note expressing hope that "DB, Two Socks, Where to Go, and Pop-pop" made it over that icy mountain! I was amazed that he and Backtrack had made it yesterday! By 5:00 PM the shelter was pretty much full, but Tina never arrived. I was concerned about her, having expected her all afternoon, but we were not hiking together and I was confident she would be all right. (I'd last seen her sitting at trailside, on one of the steeper parts of the icy descent north of Clingman's.) I did some planning that afternoon, figuring I could make it to the northern GSMNF border in either four or five days — Icedwater tomorrow, etc.

After hearing others' plans to catch a free 11:00 AM shuttle to Gatlinburg, however, I considered my knee and the 70 miles or so to Hot Springs — and I wasn't even sure of medical facilities there — and decided to catch that shuttle too. A late-arriving couple wedged in beside me (I was against one wall); the man foolishly kept a zip-lock bag of trail mix at his

head, and a mouse worked on it for much of the night. I thought seriously about using my tarp more often to avoid the shelter crowds.

Anxious to catch that 11:00 AM shuttle to Gatlinburg, I began packing up at the Mount Collins Shelter at 6:15 AM on Thursday, April 4, 2013. It takes me longer than most, perhaps partly because I must empty the main compartment of the pack completely to insert the Achilles tendon "night splint." About 7:15 AM I was distressed to learn that the shuttle was at 10:30 AM, not 11, and with 5 miles (including the ½ mile of side trail back to the AT) to go at my 7:35 AM departure time and my 45-minute-mile pace, it was going to be tight! Even if it were only 4.4 miles, ¾ of 4.4 is 3.3 (3 hours 18 minutes), for an ETA of 10:53... my shelter-mates said "10:30 to 11-ish" but that was NO GOOD! I hoped the 'spikes and generally descending trail would allow me to beat the 45 min/mile pace.

I moved along, in light rain, as well as I could, avoiding injury on the icy trail. (Still, I have never fallen on my AT hike!) Several younger hikers passed me, but I couldn't safely go any faster.

I was pleased to arrive at a large parking area, with several parked vehicles, in a heavy mist, at 10:20 AM. But no backpackers were visible, and I hadn't expected to reach Route 441 (Newfound Gap) that soon. In confusion, I decided the 441 crossing was farther along, and in my soaking wet clothes (How do I get soaked in that expensive Arc'Teryx jacket?) headed north, up a sidewalk, out of the parking area. But I prudently stopped to check my guidebook pages and learned that 441 was, indeed, right at that parking area! I went back and wandered around, still confused as to where my fellow NOBOs were, and chilly in the cold rain. A young woman arrived, headed south on the AT, also looking for a ride to Gatlinburg — she had a pleasant German accent and did not know about the shuttle; she'd planned to hitchhike.

While we were chatting and deciding what to do, a white van arrived, with Nantahala Outdoor Center on the side! It pulled right up in front of us, and unloaded several 'packers; its friendly silver-haired driver told us to jump right in for the free ride to Gatlinburg! It was a warm and pleasant 15 miles, chatting with the driver and the very nice young German woman. We were dropped off at the Gran Prix Motel, the hostel where most thru-hikers stayed and the German girl was headed. My planned lodging, the Red Roof Inn, was just next door. It was only about noon, or earlier, when I depacked in ground-floor room 114, a warm, pleasant room with refrigerator and microwave.

Prepared to stay a couple of days to care for my knee and plan the immediate future, I telephoned the first clinic I found in the Yellow Pages — it turned out to be in Sevierville, about 30 miles away, which I hadn't realized until well after I was told a car would be sent to transport me! After lunch and a shower, my Smoky Mountain Urgentcare visit provided me with a fancy new knee brace (hinges on each side) and a Naproxen prescription. Back in my room by 5:30 PM, I caught the handy 50¢ trolley (virtually from my motel-room door) to a stop near the Walgreen's to which my prescription had been telephoned. I bought some nice new Foster Grant reading glasses, a soft ice pack, lithium AAAs (required in the SPOT), and some groceries. I wasn't sure how to catch the trolley back to the motel, so I walked it (slowly) without noticeable knee pain. Milk, doughnuts, cheese danish, chocolate milk... ah, I needed that!

Friday morning I added two more nights to my stay — Saturday and Sunday. Monday I'll be either on the shuttle to Newfound Gap and Icewater Spring Shelter, or the Discount Taxi Service to the Knoxville Airport. The hope and current plan is the former!

I enjoyed three "zeroes" and a "nero" in Gatlinburg — zeroes Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, April 5-7 2013 and most of Thursday, after the morning's tense 5-mile dash to Newfound Gap. The luxury was enjoyable (shelter, plumbing, bed, television, restaurant food), but of course these days *raison d'être* was the knee problem, and that created considerable anxiety. I loved the "herbivore's" vegetarian pizza at Big Daddy's, a five-minute walk from the motel, but the Gatlinburg Subway restaurant wasn't worth the trouble. One woman was handling a busy lunch crowd alone and I was unable to persuade her to make what was, in effect, a cheese sub; she added just a few slices of cheese to a pile of lettuce and tomato, and the price (Veggie with the charge for extra cheese) was more than a roast beef's.

The Motel 6 (nee Red Roof Inn) was really nice. The price (before taxes, etc.) was only \$40 per night and the service was excellent. The housekeeping crew cleaned the room and made the bed every day, and the front-desk people were friendly and helpful. Most hikers were staying next door at the Gran Prix, and I don't remember what its rooms cost; fortunately, at my age, it was unnecessary to pinch pennies (or even double sawbucks). It certainly was, when I was the age of many of my fellow thru-hikers!

It was great to meet Slow But Sure and Because Of Her in the Walgreen's one day, and to chat with DB Cooper in front of his Gran Prix Motel as I was returning "home" one afternoon. DB told me of a young man with heel blisters so severe that they had become infected and caused blood poisoning — "septic," I think is the word. He received professional medical treatment just in time to avoid amputation... and, of course, was planning (against the doctor's advice) to return to the trail. I stopped in at the NOC a couple of times, buying an Eno hammock and the recommended strap system; I met Backtrack there Friday, much to my delight, as he waited for their Newfound Gap shuttle. Later that day I wrote up my trek from Fontana to Gatlinburg and mailed it to my wife.

Much of the time was caring for the knee, alternating icing it with the Walgreen's flexible pack and resting and elevating it using the new brace. As my call to Discount Taxi Service (\$80 to Knoxville Airport) shows, I was still quite

concerned about my right knee. My memories and notes of the stay in Gatlinburg are a bit vague — mostly, resting the knee while watching television! I walked the main street a few times, amused at the hillbilly attractions but not succumbing to any of them.

Sunday I made my decision: NO AIRPORT! I worked on my pack, ate the food I didn't want to carry with me, and, with the usual excitement, prepared to hit the trail again tomorrow morning.

Monday, April 8 2013, it was back to business after 3½ zeroes in Gatlinburg, and despite concern about my right knee was eager to be on the trail again as I donned my hiking clothes. I checked out of the Motel 6 at 9:30 and trundled down the hill to the Nantahala Outdoor Center for its ~10:00 AM shuttle to Newfound Gap. Seven others filled the van.

After a couple of photos I left the large Newfound Gap parking area, walking cautiously and tentatively, at 10:50 AM. This was to be a 3-mile trial, just to the first shelter (Icewater Spring). If the knee didn't feel right, I'd backtrack Tuesday for the morning NOC shuttle back to Gatlinburg and a taxi to the Knoxville Airport.

The walk was a bit rocky and hilly, but seemed to go fairly well, and I arrived at Icewater at 1:10 PM — 2 hours for 3 miles is my normal 40-minute-mile pace. Several people were already there, but I snagged a spot beside an effusive young woman named (she explained, with some chagrin) Candypants, after the candy-cane design on her pajama pants. She had started March 11 also, and was with me our first night at the Stover Creek Shelter!

The Icewater register showed Wild Rain "passing through" on March 31, Triple Step, Camel, and Pumpkin King on April 2, and Mallette on April 4. Pop-pop, Great Legs, Blackhawk Bob, and Turtletracks were at Icewater April 5, and DB Cooper April 6. Candypants told me that Fun Size and Bottle Cap pulled off for a week due to her grandmother's death.

One young woman at Icewater had an excellent tarp setup; her name was Wooden Spoon, and I was to meet her often in the next few days. An older grandmotherly woman, a small woman with tightly pulled-back gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses, was tenting on the hill above the shelter. I was to meet her often, too: Tracy McG, named by her husband after Dick Tracy and MacGyver. It was impressive to see Tracy move strongly with a pack probably as heavy as mine (~40 lbs.)! I do not publicly guess women's ages, but privately put Tracy's somewhere around my own 68. I couldn't help but think of Granny Clampett, on The Beverly Hillbillies, and the Beach Boys' song with the refrain "Go Granny, Go Granny, Go Granny Go!" ("The Little Old Lady from Pasadena"?). It must have tickled the young folks to see Tracy and me together — I know it would have me, when I was 20!

It was a long, relaxing afternoon at Icewater — not that I really needed that, after 3½ zeroes and a 3-mile day! Several of us slackers enjoyed the warm, bright sun in the field at the front of the shelter, caught up on our trail notes and snacking, and chatted pleasantly. I was pleased with my knee, and was confident I could go on: the option of returning tomorrow morning for an ignominious shuttle back to Gatlinburg was solidly rejected that fine afternoon!

With the fateful up-or-out choice made, I left Icewater Spring Shelter at 8:30 AM on Tuesday, April 9 2013. Trail ice led to the use of the Microspikes for perhaps 15 minutes (on and off a couple of times), but the trail was quite pleasant, walking — as often seems to be the case — north along the eastern slope of a ridge. I passed Wooden Spoon, the young woman with the proficient tarp setup, as she grappled with an icy section... but (as is so often the case, at my pace!) she soon overtook me and went past. The day was warm, and I was soon sweating. Views to the west, from ridge tops, showed towns and flat land; to the right, just blue rolling mountains. At 9:08 I reached the south end of "Charlie's Bunion," a rock formation with a warning to "Watch Children Closely"; I skipped it and stuck to the right turn on the AT. A 9:21 self-photo was primarily to show the nature of the trail. I was finding the Smokies quite spectacular.

Around noon, I took a 15-minute lunch stop with Bulldog (a lanky man with a unique hearty laugh, who'd been at Icewater) and Hankman (shorter and more stocky, somewhat resembling DB Cooper), neither seen since, at the map's 5-mile "View." After sending a SPOT "OK" message to my family, I moved along — still planning to make Tri-Corner that day. It was a beautiful day for walking, with bright sun and the dirt path relatively level and smooth, occasionally shaded (and scented!) by balsam firs. I was pleased to reach the Peck's Corner Shelter turnoff at only 1:37 PM — Tri-Corner was definitely within reason!

Tracy McG and I leapfrogged a few times — she walks faster but takes occasional breaks. What a pleasant lady. The spectacular views continued, with the path sometimes traversing a narrow ridge barely wider than the path itself, steep hillsides dropping off to left (west) and right (east). The west view was mountains, then flatland and development, the east simply blue-tinged wooded mountains. I last passed Tracy as she was processing some water in late morning. At 2:15 PM I came to a Geodesic Survey marker (1963, ele 5,849')... and at 5:05 PM rolled into the Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, packed to overflowing with teens or 20-somethings — nothing I hadn't expected!

I found a semi-level site, mighty sparse in that mountainous country, and erected the tarp. It was level side-to-side, at least, but sloped slightly downhill toward my feet. Tracy rolled in about half an hour later; she'd taken a break (and a nap!) at Peck's Corner. Her little tent had a definite slope to it, but the only level spots were directly under the bear cable or on the privy platform! We were pretty close to the privy as it was, and were reminded of that occasionally with shifts in the nighttime wind. I set up my new Enos hammock, uncertain how to use its special straps, and cooked and ate Wild West Chili from a comfortable seated position. A young man nearby also had an Enos hammock — but the full setup: quilt and fly. I

would have been far too cold trying to sleep in mine; I remember that from my Scotland hike!

It was a beautiful starry night, and I was glad not to be in the shelter. The kids there were exuberant, with guitar playing and laughing... until about 8:15 PM or so, when it abruptly went quiet, as if someone had flipped off a switch! Good for them! On my first real, whole, day of knee-brace hiking I'd successfully made 14.7 miles (if I recall correctly; I just sent my map home.) [Nope... the guidebook says 12.6 mi from Icewater to Tri-Corner.]

Wednesday morning, April 10 2013, I continued my new practice of arising at 6:00 AM and targeting an 8:00 AM start. I've seen others, like my hammocking neighbor at Tri-Corner, be up and out in about 20 minutes, but not me! (For one thing, the Achilles night splint must be packed first, so the entire main compartment must be emptied each evening and morning.) The plan worked today: Arose at 6, and back on the AT northbound at exactly 8:00 AM, headed for the Smokies' last (NOBO) shelter, Davenport Gap. Tracy planned to make that too.

The Microspikes again did their job for about 15 minutes of icy west-slope trail, and the day's first hour and a half of trail was somewhat rocky and rough, calling for a lot of care and reliance on poles and arms to protect my knee. By about 10 AM, though, we were on the east face of the ridge in bright sun on a pleasant, though gradually ascending, path. I encountered a few flying insects, including a couple of house flies, first seen yesterday; I recall thinking, in Georgia's freezing snowstorms, that I would welcome them! One of them bit me. Oh well...

I kept my eyes peeled for the "plane wreckage" mentioned in the guidebook, but the ominously named Snake Den Ridge Trail arrived at 10:26 AM and the wreckage had been, unnoticed, 0.1 mile before it. Around 11 AM I noted how delightful it was to be able to be doing this — walking this trail on this beautiful warm day. I was taking it easy, with rocks preventing me from letting my stride out, but it just struck me what a huge privilege it was to be able to be doing this! I took a shot of the trail ahead, at 11:12 AM, and stopped for lunch for fifteen minutes around 12:30 PM — a SPOT message went out, but (as usual) there was no cell-phone coverage. The Cosby Knob Shelter turn arrived at 1:08; I didn't go there, but did pause to shift to shorts (removing my zip-off legs) and T-shirt.

Low Gap came along at 1:48... and, boy, was it ever! We ascended 800 feet in the next hour and fifteen minutes — I finally reached the top at 3:03 PM. I leapfrogged with Tumbleweed, the young woman who told me of the 800' rise, and her companion Dennis (no trail name yet), and at 2:30 PM a southbound day-hiker said I was the 59th person headed north that he had passed that day! It was a long, frustrating climb; several times I thought I'd reached the top, descending...only to begin another ascent. But shortly after 3:00 I came to the Mt. Camerer Trail intersection. A pleasant young man I'd met at Low Gap, Chicago, was sitting there, and he encouraged me to follow that trail 0.6 miles for a spectacular view. I instantly demurred and moved on, pausing from 3:30 to 3:40 to collect and treat water from a small but clear trailside seep.

A 4:43 PM photo of the trail ahead shows it curling across a slope, mildly descending, covered with brown leaf duff. At 4:50 the Lower Camerer Trail sign reported 2.9 miles to Davenport Gap, and another sign (Chestnut Branch Trail) at 5:22 reported 1.9 miles. The turn to shelter arrived, to my pleased surprise, at 5:55 PM, and I depacked there at 5:58 PM! (I later decided that I'd formulated my 7:00 ETA by confusing "Davenport Gap" with "Davenport Gap Shelter.") The shelter, of course, was full.

I shared a narrow flat area behind the shelter with Dennis and Tumbleweed's small tent; Tracy McG arrived half an hour later, again having taken an hour's break (this time at Cosby Knob). I was greeted warmly by another lady, Salsa (hiking with her daughter, Twix), who kindly inquired about my knee. I was to meet them again, but can't recall where I'd met them before. The Davenport Gap Shelter is fenced in, with stiff wire mesh covering its front opening, against bears; I've heard that it is the only AT shelter still using this system. We just hung our food bags inside, and at night the wire gate was closed and latched.

It was a pleasant night, and Thursday, April 11 2013, (my one-month anniversary on the trail!) I was back on the AT at 7:55 AM. It took only half an hour to reach the thru-hiker Permit Box at the northern border of the Smokies; Chicago and his companion Private Snowball were there too, and we took each others' photos — I was out of the Great Smoky Mountain National Forest!

At 9:25 I self-photo'd my crossing of the Pigeon River bridge, then snapped one of the I-40 sign to Asheville or Knoxville... "back to civilization," I thought! The day's long climb began with a rise to Green Corner Road, attained at 10:14 AM. I followed Chicago and Private Snowball up the road to Standing Bear Farm. There was quite a crowd there — someone later referred to it as "a zoo" — but I retrieved my drop box, left some trash, and headed back down the road at 10:50 AM. Several hikers there called me by name (the pleasant young man named Dyno DNA, for one) and asked if I was staying. It was nice to be recognized and known. Many of the young people were staying, that night, in the crowded bunkhouse.

Down the road I was able to get an AT&T connection, but Hot Springs' Alpine Court Motel's phone number was bad or disconnected. In desperation I called my wife at her work; she got me in at Iron Horse Station for the 14th and 15th. Tracy McG soon passed me; she'd skipped the Farm and had just spoken by cell phone with her husband.

What a long afternoon's climb! From Pigeon River (1400' elevation) we climbed, in hot sun, to the summit of Snowbird Mountain (4,263', if I recall correctly). Tracy took several breaks, and I chugged past — her strategy, despite her

stated admiration for my perseverance, was smarter! I occasionally even doubted if I would make it that afternoon, with hints of cramps in my left hamstring, the heat, and running low on water. I could camp, and resume tomorrow... but a Tracy-inspired 10-minute rest at 2:00 PM rejuvenated me, and I vowed to take another break at 3:00.

At 3:00, however, I could virtually see the fire tower, so I plugged on and arrived at the Snowbird summit at 3:10 PM. Just as I was emerging from the woods onto the clear summit, Tracy (a few hundred yards ahead) was returning to the trail from her visit to the tower, and we waved cordially. The FAA tower, looking futuristic like a space ship, was not user-friendly: No Trespassing signs, no place to sit down... I took a few photos, ate a snack, walked off a worrisome cramp in an abdomen muscle, and hit the trail at 3:23 PM. Aristotle, a white-bearded man who was hard of hearing, had arrived shortly after me and left shortly before. I have a photo of him heading north, from the tower, on the AT. The bald summit's 360° view was nice, and I soon photographed a young man sitting down to enjoy one of them.

It was nice to be descending, after that horrendous ascent, and the trail was pleasant. I rolled into the Groundhog Creek Shelter area at 4:50 PM, greeted warmly by DynoDNA ("Werdigo! You made it!"). The 6-person shelter was, as usual, overflowing, but I'd come to prefer my tarp anyway so I found a level spot near perhaps ten or fifteen other tents, and set up. Tracy McG, who I'd passed as she rested along the trail, arrived half an hour later — she began to look for a tent site, and that's the last time I saw her.

Storms were forecast that night, so I quickly obtained water from a nearby small stream and crawled into my bag. (I had heard a young woman, standing beside that stream, inquire "Where's the water source?" There was a designated one, quite a walk away, but I was bemused. After all, we're treating it all anyway! People can get mighty fussy about the source of their water.) A young man came over and asked, "Is this all you have? There are going to be big storms tonight!" I assured him that I'd be fine, but he invited me over to his spacious Kelty tent, nearby, if things got dicey! He said he'd started on the trail March 2, one of the few hikers I've met who started before me, but spent 10 days waiting out the Georgia snowstorms.

The night did feature spectacular lightning, with one flash actually red, and thunder and rain. I was splashed lightly on the forehead — I think it was splash from the ground. I scooted down farther into my tarp and pulled my rain-jacket hood over my head, and had no further problems. A morning photo, snapped after I'd packed up, shows the dry area protected by the tarp. It had been an exciting, exhilarating night!

After a stormy night at Groundhog Creek, complete with thunder and flashing lightning, on Friday morning (April 12, 2013) I considered using further incipient rain as an excuse to arise late, but nixed that. I arose at 6 and hit the AT at 8:15 AM. I looked around for Tracy's tent, but didn't see it; maybe she left earlier. If not, I figured she'd soon be passing me.) The morning was very humid and misty, and cool enough that I wore mittens. The trail, though ascending, was quite pleasant, maybe 2½' wide with few roots and rocks. But there was light moisture — at first, I thought simply wind blowing water off trees; then I thought light rain, eventually realizing it was sleet! It was not enough to justify rain gear — body heat, I guess, dried it on my clothes — but it was a bit irritating. At 9:49 AM I came to Rube Rock Trail, and was enjoying the smooth, padded dirt path when I came to Trail Magic at Brown Gap (10:10 to 10:27)! Apple has been here 4 days; he does this full-time, covering four trails: the AT, Florida, Continental Divide, and ... I forget the fourth. My photo was taken with him; he said he'd heard earlier arrivals talking about Werdigo.

It was a long climb out of Brown Gap, though nothing like yesterday's climb. The trail again traversed the east side of a ridge, smooth and pleasant, reminding me of fond memories in the Vermont woods 55 years ago, and of my solo bicycle trip to the Adirondacks' T Lake Falls in 1963. At 12:12 I crossed Max Patch Road and began a series of stair climbs up to the bald, grassy summit. The mist was so thick one could hardly see the next trail-marking post, but I reached the summit at 12:42 PM, sending my family a SPOT message. After asking a fellow hiker to snap my photo, like others I scrapped my plan for a summit lunch. I'm told that Max Patch Bald views are wonderful — but not today! I high-tailed it down out of the cold wind and mist, welcoming a forest path again.

It had stopped raining or sleeting, and the sun made a brief appearance, so the northbound path on the east side of a ridge was relatively nice. About 1:45 I dropped down to the Roaring Fork Shelter for lunch. A group of perhaps eight 20-somethings was there. I was back on the AT at 2:05 PM, facing 4.9 miles to the Walnut Mountain Shelter. But the sun came out in full, the trail was nice, temperature cool... I was enjoying the North Carolina woods.

The trail was padded, 2½' or 3' wide, gentle descents or ascents — very nice! At 4:03 I reached Lemon Gap, where a University of Florida van as dislodging a group of perhaps 8 apparently beginning backpackers, headed for Max Patch with their brand-new gear. At another vehicle, though, some thru-hikers offered modest trail magic; I had a Gatorade and a hamburger roll! Onward and upward... I arrived at the Walnut Mountain Shelter at 4:58 PM and erected my tarp on a nearby level ridge.

The fellows at the shelter asked if I knew what a "safety meeting" was, or a "fire drill." These were apparently code words for a marijuana-smoking event. They invited me to join; I declined, but urged them to go ahead. Unfortunately I had called the wind direction wrong, and suffered a windy and chilly night, though it was free of precipitation and clear and starry. It was nice to meet Moonshiner, who I'd last seen weeks ago worried about boot problems near Georgia's Deep Gap

Shelter. He was surprised that I remembered that! He'd gone into Hiwassee, REI had overnighted him new boots, and he'd moved along ever since! He was going the 13 miles into Hot Springs tomorrow.

Saturday, April 13 2013, I was up at 6 and out at 7:53AM, encountering a delightful camping area (level, with a fire ring, amid pines) half an hour later! I wished I'd implemented my idea of wild-camping beyond the shelter! Dyno-DNA passed — everyone seemed to be hustling to get to Hot Springs today, but not me! With a short 10-mile day planned, I was relaxed and comfortable, enjoying the delightful trail. About 10:30 I came to an area with no understory, just tall deciduous trees through the woods in all directions, like a park. It was cool, with a clear blue sky. I filled one Platypus bag at a marked spring, and enjoyed the slow relaxed walk. I came to an area with green ground cover on both sides of the trail — low, needle-like leafed plants covering the ground between the trees. Around noon I began to encounter some pines, and then balsam firs — most welcome! I reached Garenflo Gap at 12:22 (Deer Park Shelter 3.4 mi, Hot Springs 6.6 mi), just after chatting with two pleasant men clearing blowdowns with a chain saw. Only 2 hours later, at 2:27 PM, I depacked in a delightful pin-needle laden flat camping area behind Deer Park Shelter.

With the tarp erected, I also set up the Eno hammock between two trees immediately beside the tarp, and was enjoying coffee (brewed on the ground beside the hammock, without getting up!) when Salsa and Twix arrived. Salsa again expressed concern for my knee, asked my age (I was too chivalrous to ask hers), and we talked a little about each other. (She just retired from a 36-year career with State Farm Insurance, some kind of systems or claims analyst, I think.) I hoped to see Tracy McG, but she never showed at Walnut Mountain either. Twix, at my request, snapped a photo of me drinking (supposedly) coffee in my hammock. (Since I'd already had 2 cups, this photo's prop was just water!) Twix was amused. Nice girl.

It was a beautiful starry night at Deer Park, but cool enough that I used my sleeping-bag liner.

At our delightful Deer Park Shelter campsite, Salsa and Twix, and I, started to move about 6:00 AM, Sunday April 14 2013, but they were out way before me. (They had no reservations in Hot Springs, and were a little concerned about accommodations.) I reached the AT at 7:52, and was passed 10 minutes later by Wooden Spoon, whose great tarp setup was near mine (I photographed it before she got up), and her dog Guya. At 9:40 I left Pisgah National Forest and was photographed at a plaque by a nice young woman. After a brief false start down Serpentine Avenue, I found the AT, and at 9:57 AM was seated for breakfast at the Smoky Mountain Diner!

Half an hour later, I found nobody at the Iron Horse reception desk, so I walked across the street to do laundry at The Wash Tub. Returning while the machines were doing their work — Moonshiner was there, too — I met Beverly, the outgoing and helpful Iron Horse hostess, and was smoothly checked in. After a little bit of confusion about rooms, I landed in 201, a large airy room with double-hung windows that opened, and a nice king-sized bed, bathroom with tub and shower... but no in-room TV! That night, though, I had the adjacent TV lounge all to myself, and enjoyed "The Amazing Race" and "The Good Wife," darting next door to my bathroom during commercials just as I would have at home! Salsa, who I met at The Wash Tub, had chosen Alpine Court because it had TVs in rooms.

With a two-night reservation, I relaxed and looked forward to a full zero tomorrow.

Monday, April 15 2013, I strolled down to the Smoky Mountain Diner for breakfast. Sunday and Monday, though, I had lunch and dinner right at the Iron Horse. It was nice to find a Dollar General store, near the diner, and I shopped there twice. An outfitter had a public-use computer, so I was able to send email messages to my family. On Monday my drop box arrived, and when I picked it up at the Post Office I mailed home my Microspikes and various papers that I'll no longer need. It was tempting to hang around for yet another zero day, enjoying the luxuries of towns, but Tuesday it's back to business!

After a final breakfast at the Smoky Mountain Diner on Tuesday morning, April 16 2013, I pulled out of the Iron Horse shortly after 8:00 AM, headed north along the road and had no trouble following the AT as it climbed over the guardrail and descended to the level of the French Broad River. After passing several wild-campers, including perhaps a small group of inexperienced youth, the trail began a series of switchbacks, offering nice views of the river and of Hot Springs. I snapped several photos, some in which my Iron Horse room window can be identified.

A bit after 9AM I passed Vagabond, a 70-year-old woman who made it to PA in a previous year. We leapfrogged a little as I paused for photos, but I pulled away from her about 9:40. Once the crest was reached, it became a beautiful morning for hiking, with few rocks or roots in the trail. By 10:20 I was winding around the west side of a ridge, with birds tweeting and the sun out; with Vagabond behind somewhere, I was hiking alone... as I like it!

Shortly before noon I came to a pond with a couple of trailside benches, and met Big and Little Brother. They had Long Trail patches, so we chatted briefly about that 270-mile trail, which I hiked in 2004 (185 miles) and 2005 (85 miles). At the second bench I had lunch, and pulled out about 12:05 PM after sending a SPOT message and formulating an ETA of 2:00 PM for Rich Mountain — it's 3 miles, and I planned to camp just beyond its fire tower.

The AT soon emerged onto a dirt road, complete with a few parked pickup trucks... we were out of the Smokies for sure! I got a little confused at Mill Ridge but fixed that with a compass check, and after re-entering the woods found a few pieces of rusty automotive sheet metal — ah yes, civilization! At 12:45 an overpass crossed a four-lane highway, US 25/70,

and the trail again began to climb. At a 2:30 pause for rest I switched to shorts and T-shirt, reached the trail turn at 2:56 and the top of the Rich Mountain fire tower at 3:03 PM. The views were nice, with Hot Spring clearly apparent. The Brothers soon arrived, and we snapped a few photos in the tower.

Five minutes after returning to the AT at 3:20, I was depacking the tent site just north of the fire tower. Several others were there, most in a group apparently led by a tall, thin man (The Major, if I recall correctly) who sported a small black top hat; the group, which included a black and a Hispanic man (Rawhide), were SOBO section hikers. From overheard comments I infer that a couple of them were hoping to learn enough (from The Major and others; they were very interested in my tarp setup) to be able later to take their children backpacking. Nice group — I was pleased to share the site with them. My early arrival encouraged setting up the hammock; I enjoyed several cups of coffee while lying in it, then dinner (BP Cheese Enchilada Ranchero) while sitting in it.

It was a pleasant night at the tenting area just north of the Rich Mountain Fire Tower, but rain and lightning around 5:00 AM delayed my Wednesday, April 17 2013, start a bit. I discovered that the knee brace had caused abrasion on my right thigh and calf, so I wrapped my old elastic-free Ace bandage around the leg first. I was back on the AT, headed north, at 8:15 AM, finding a cool, windy, and very overcast morning that looked like a good day for hiking. Half an hour later I crossed Hurricane Gap Road, and soon encountered the first of several gravestones along the trail (Rex Paulford, 1920-1983); I wondered how one got to be buried here! Maybe there's no grave here at all. Another one, Jaelyn Mae Kelly-Morris, who died in 1990, came along at 9:00 AM.

The walking was pleasant: a nice packed-dirt path with few roots or rocks, and a cool light breeze with very overcast sky. I noted that this was a much better trail, for walking, than the AT of my first few weeks! Shortly before 10:00 AM I donned my rain gear, and ten minutes later arrived at Spring Mountain Shelter. Another hiker soon arrived; he had a snack, and I had my lunch. There was a large fresh jar of peanut butter there — my lunch was two large tortillas slathered with it. The young man and I talked briefly about the norovirus that was reported to be severe between Hot Springs and Erwin, with advice to avoid shelters and privies, but we risked the brief break. Someone had left other food, too; my companion took some instant oatmeal, and I took about 6 packets that he left. The register showed that Salsa and Twix were here yesterday, with plans to camp last night just beyond the shelter.

At 11:45 I passed through Deep Gap and formulated an ETA of 1:10 PM to a road (NC 208); at 12:30, in some light rain, I changed the ETA to 1:05... and crossed the highway exactly then. Some ads for Hemlock Hollow Hostel were tempting, but I passed it by; I never exactly identified Log Cabin Drive anyway, and don't think the dirt road I crossed at 2:30 (with a private home to the right) was it.

Plugging along, I was getting a bit tired by 3:30 PM but kept rolling at my 40-minute-mile pace and arrived at the Little Laurel Shelter at 4:40. After a brief chat with the handful of men staying there that night, and fetching a liter of water, I headed out at 5:10 PM, with only 2.1 miles to my day's destination, a camping area at Jones Meadow.

Werdigo, you've really got to learn to look at your maps! Much of those two miles was a climb of 1,130', gradual but continuous and tiring, that took me to the fire tower's side trail at 6:15 PM. I welcomed the descent, glad that climb was behind me, and began looking for Jones Meadow. At 6:50 I collected 3L of water from a trailside spring, marked with a blue "W" sign, and headed left up a blue-marked side trail. At 7:05 I came out on a road, with a big grassy field across it, and thought that maybe that's Jones Meadow. There was nobody else around, and I didn't like the looks of it, so I backtracked to the AT and erected my tarp just west of the trail, behind a fallen tree, just north of the intersection with the blue trail. I heard voices back along the AT, probably at the spring, but didn't investigate. It had been a tiring day, but it was a pleasant night, warm and clear with a sky of stars. I still wonder where Jones Meadow was.

Arising from my near-Jones-Meadow tarp Thursday, April 18 2013, I found a windy and very misty morning at 5:40 AM. Still not quite awake, I decided to enjoy some of the instant oatmeal someone had left at Spring Mountain Shelter yesterday, so (still lying in the tarp) I fired up the Pocket Rocket, emptied two packets of oatmeal into an aluminum dish, and poured in the boiling water. Something looked funny, so I found my reading glasses and looked at the empty packets: grits with imitation bacon bits! Bah! I'm a vegetarian! The bacon was phony (soy, I guess) but the taste was so strong I almost gagged. Out it went... I hope creatures of the wild enjoyed some of it. Amusing in retrospect... and I even thought it was kind of funny at the time! I may have heard someone come in and camp near the spring, after dark, but nobody passed my little informal site this morning.

As I pulled out at 7:30 AM, the mist was still very thick and the wind strong; half an hour later the sun was making an effort but the wind continued to roar high up in the trees. There weren't many white blazes, which I found a little disconcerting. At 8:10 an overlook at Whiterock Cliff came along, and at 8:15 a trail left to Blackstack Cliffs; between them were two blue-marked trails west, unidentified... perhaps the heavily traveled one went to Jones Meadow! At 8:24 the Jerry Miller Trail headed off to the right, and two minutes later a sign offered the choice of a "Bad Weather Trail" (blue, left) or "Exposed Ridgeline Trail" (white, straight) — despite the high wind, it wasn't raining, sleeting, or snowing, so I headed for the ridgeline.

Around 9:00 AM I reached the narrow ridge, and it was very windy. A couple of gusts almost blew me off my feet

— I wouldn't have fallen far, just into some rocks and bushes, but it would have been uncomfortable! I never felt the need to crouch down on all fours, but sometimes I was afraid to move, reluctant to give up one of my four points of contact with the mountain. On the ascent I found "DB Cooper" written on a rock with a marker; nice to know he's still around, but DB that's a no-no! At 9:18 another "To bad weather trail" opportunity was offered, but we were soon descending and at 9:52 I reached the bad-weather trail's north end. Glad I didn't take it — that narrow, wind-blown Big Firescald ridge was a thrill and a half!

By 10:30 AM the path was wide and smooth, almost wheel-chair accessible. I was passed by a middle-aged man, Knight Rider, and we joked about our mutual fondness for that silly TV show. He was at the Jerry Cabin Shelter when I rolled in at 10:52 AM, and was tickled at my explanation of what KITT (the name of the show's talking Trans-Am) means: Knight Industries Two Thousand! He'd started on March 24, and typically does 20-mile days. Not Werdigo! A friendly girl snapped our photo, with my three extended fingers denoting that we were roughly at the 300-mile point.

After lunch of a couple of tortillas with peanut butter, I left the shelter at 11:40 AM. Despite the continued wind gusts, the path was pleasant, interrupted briefly by a somewhat confusing boulder jumble around 1:00 PM — a nice group of older day-hikers met me there, and their friendliness took some of the sting out of the boulders. The trail then picked up a dirt road, very easy walking, that took me to the Shelton Gravesite at 1:50 PM (where a woman snapped my photo, and I snapped one of her and her friend) and the Green Ridge Trail at 2:00 PM. We then began a long descent, 900' I believe, to Flint Gap, reached shortly before 3:00 PM; I formulated an ETA of 3:30 for the shelter and 4:20 for the spring, about 1.2 miles beyond the shelter, where I planned to camp.

Flint Mountain Shelter arrived at 3:27, as expected; with water only a mile down the trail at my day's destination I just chatted briefly with the fellows there and moved on. I didn't note my time of arrival at my campsite, but it had to be before 4:30 PM. The trail descended, along the east side of a ridge, then took a sharp right turn over a tiny brush-clogged gully, and began a gradual ascent. I figured that gully must contain water, probably the guidebook's "spring," so I pulled up and looked around.

Just before the gully and the sharp right turn there was a level area to the right, almost as if an old road had once come in there. I chose that for my tarp site, and was able to fetch water from a small seep down in the gully. It was still early, and pleasantly sunny, so I hung the hammock beside the tarp and enjoyed coffee in comfort. Relaxed, caffeine'd, warm and dry and alone, this was what I loved! I experienced a sense of euphoria at being here, and being able to do this — "camping out," that's what I like!

After a pleasant night at my informal tarp site about a mile north of Flint Mountain Shelter, I arose Friday, April 19 2013, at 5:30 and began my walk north at 7:18 AM. I was a little concerned about the right knee, with some unfamiliar pains out of it yesterday perhaps arising from the Big Firescald ridge climb. There were still 30 or so miles to Erwin, the next possible source of medical help or bail point. My plan was to camp tonight at a meadow 4 miles north of Hogback Ridge Shelter.

About 8AM I crossed Route 212, finding some cards for Appalachian Transport Service ("Your ride can be ready in just minutes"). Slightly tempting, especially with another knee twinge when I twisted to get the card... but another road crossing arrived at 8:25 and then a long ascent began. About 8:45 I passed "The Cascade," an attractive sheet of water cascading down a steep rock face. It had been raining lightly, and I donned the rain jacket about 10 minutes before the apparent end of the climb at 10:00 AM.

But the climb continued, and I was not feeling well. My T-shirt and hiking shirt were soaked under the expensive Arc'Teryx rain jacket and the color of my urine indicated insufficient hydration. On long climbs I sometimes reassure myself that, as a matter of logic, nothing can ascend forever... but by 10:40 was wondering if this was an exception. I felt really tired, as if I could fall asleep while trudging up the path — a puzzle, because I thought I had a good rest at my delightful campsite last night.

About 11:00 AM I reached what seemed to be another maximum (local or global, I wondered?), and saw a man erecting his tarp in a nearby level area. It seemed like a strange time of day to be setting up camp, so I wondered if he was feeling as I was, and if perhaps it would be wise for me to do the same. But I trudged on, soaking wet in increasingly heavy rain, tired and dehydrated, until I reached the path to Hogback Ridge Shelter at 1:00 PM, exactly my ETA. There were already 5 or 6 occupants — I learned later they were taking "zeros" and had spent last night at this shelter — but they immediately made room for me while I hoofed it down a ¼ mile path to the water source. (One young man, though he seemed strong, experienced, and well-equipped, said he had vowed never to hike in the rain!) It was just a pipe mounted on a steep rocky stream, and the heavy rainfall brought a great deal of sediment with the water. Back at the shelter, it settled to the bottom of my Platypus bags so I used the water anyway.

I felt quite bad, and changed into my dry "camp" clothes at once — what a pleasure to shuck those soaking-wet shirts — and crawled into my sleeping bag, second from the right wall (when looking out). Shivering, I used the bag liner and put the aluminized "space blanket" between the Z-rest pad and the bag. I forced myself to eat something for lunch, but spent nearly the whole afternoon in the bag. The man beside me did, too; one young fellow commented that we probably

wouldn't sleep that night, but he didn't know how I felt.

Several others arrived later that day, with most of them tenting nearby. There was room, beside me, for a man trail-named "Professor" — he actually was one, and a libertarian at that, so we exchanged a few brief comments about economics, including my position that the very field of macroeconomics was scientifically invalid. Another of our shelter-mates asked whether I thought the Federal Reserve System ought to exist — I quickly answered "No!" but wrapped it up with that.

I felt so bad that I really wondered if I could possibly make it to Erwin, 26 miles along the trail, or even to a road crossing (where hitching or a shuttle might be available) that was said to be nearby. I wasn't even sure I could walk even a mile on that trail tomorrow. My mental state was poor — hiking alone, I tried to guard against making long-term choices under the influence of short-term conditions... but...

I rested well that night, but it was quite cold, with everything (including my wet boots) frozen solid in the morning.

A freezing morning Saturday, April 20 2013, at the Hogback Ridge Shelter found me staying in bed as others packed up and left, still concerned about how I felt. When I arose, about 8:00 AM, I remembered that I'd simply removed and stowed my soaking boots yesterday; they were frozen, and I could not get them on. Fortunately, a small group (mostly tenters, I think) had made a fire to dry their clothes, and some careful and brief exposure of my boots to it produced the flexibility I needed to get them on. I did feel quite a bit better this morning, rested, and a bright sun and clear sky offset the 26°F temperature. No longer doubting my ability to walk a mile, or even to the first road crossing, I headed out, wearing my wind hat, mittens, and rain jacket, at 9:40 AM. About an hour and a half later I discovered I'd left my rain pants, old blue Campmor Gore-Tex, hanging on a nail — they were pretty scruffy anyway, and no way was I going back to get them!

Sam's Gap arrived at 11:15 AM, with some trail magic (I snagged a couple of oranges, and discovered the loss of my rain pants). The path up out of the gap was pleasant and began to descend only half an hour later. At the top of an ascent, during which Bomber passed me, I took a break at 12:30, resting on a large fallen tree; this was at a level area, with several obvious campsites, so perhaps it was the "meadow" at which I'd planned to camp last night.

Big Bald lay ahead. At 12:50 I snapped a photo of it, and of some kind of development on a hill to the east. At 2:30 PM, as I was still ascending it, Wiki passed — he's the young man who invited me to join him and friends for a beer in Hot Springs; he had to go into Erwin to treat his norovirus and is just getting back to the trail.

At 3:45 I reached the Big Bald summit, meeting Medicine Man and Poof who took my photo. Wander (or Wonder, but Wander would be better!) Woman and Clark Kent, who'd been tenting at Hogback Ridge last night, soon arrived. The views were spectacular in all directions, better (said Wander Woman) than Max Patch's — which was completely fogged in when I was there anyway. I left the summit at 4:00 PM.

The walking was across a high-elevation grassy field, gently descending in bright sun but chilly wind; it was quite pleasant and easy. I passed the turn to Bald Mountain Shelter at 4:45 PM, reached the summit of Little Bald about 5:30 PM, and depacked at a very pleasant Whistling Gap site at 6:55 PM. Several other campers were here, in tents and tarps a hundred feet or so ahead on the trail. I camped under fir trees, beside a large fallen tree that offered a nice seat. With that to sit on, and the late arrival time, I didn't bother with the hammock. It was a chilly night (rain jacket and bag liner!), but the clear sky was filled with brilliant stars that I could see from my tarp. My site sloped with my head slightly downhill — it was either that or orient the open end windward, and I'd had enough of that! — but I slept well, very pleased with my Whistling Gap campsite. My "bear hang" was pretty casual, as it had been at several recent sites: just a few feet off the ground. I hadn't heard of, or seen, any bear activity.

My night at Whistling Gap was nice — chilly but with a clear starry sky visible from inside the tarp — but it ended when I arose about 6:00 AM on Sunday, April 21 2013. I didn't know it at the time, but that was to be my last night camping on the Appalachian Trail this year.

I hit the trail about 7:50 AM, winding my way through the Whistling Gap tenters to fetch a couple of liters of water. Wonder Woman greeted me warmly as I passed her and Clark Kent's hammock. In an hour, as I was ascending, the pleasant Aquaman passed by, and in another hour (9:40 AM) I reached Spivey Gap. As I finished the climb out of it, around 10:30 AM, I noticed a small flat stone, about a foot high and 8" wide, at the base of a trailside tree. It looked like a tiny gravestone! That idea had apparently occurred to someone else too, for on it was written, with a Sharpie, "Here lies Norovirus."

As I crossed a dirt road at 10:50, I formulated an ETA at No Business Knob Shelter of 1:00 PM. By then, on the trail 3 hours, I'd seen only two other hikers: Aquaman, and another who'd passed me. Around noon, two young women (traveling separately) passed; I passed one of them as she worked on her pack. I didn't see either of them again — wonder where they went!

No Business Knob Shelter arrived at 12:45 PM — time for lunch! Mozyin had stayed 4/10, Backtrack passed through 4/16, and Chicago and Hikerboy were in earlier today. The register made for sobering reading: Norovirus hit hard here — there were several references to non-stop vomiting. I pulled out at 1:15, leaving a note in the register that I was abandoning my AT hike at Erwin.

At 2:15 I snapped a photo, through the trees, of what might be Erwin, but I had a way to go yet! It was a frustrating 3 hours — I'd ascend to a rock outcropping with pines, sure that was the final ascent before the drop down to Erwin and encouraged by the subsequent descent... only to trudge up another ascent with a piney rock outcropping at the top. Another descent... but another ascent to rocks and pines! I felt as if I was on a treadmill! Finally a fast-moving young man passed, assuring me that the final descent was imminent. At 4:30 I snapped a shot of a railroad bridge over the Nolichucky River, and at 5:02 PM, after a long but wide and smooth switchback trail, I emerged on River Road near Uncle Johnny's.

A couple of hours earlier I'd been able to make cell-phone contact with the Holiday Inn Express, and reserved two nights there. Now to find it... despite study of my map, I began a climb up Unaka Springs Road. After a few minutes it didn't seem right, so I telephoned Holiday Inn Express — River Road runs along the river... duh! A quick descent had me back to Uncle Johnny's by 5:20, and a wonderful gentleman in a pickup truck soon gave me a ride, the mile or so, to the hotel. He asked if I was aware that the Holiday cost \$80 a night — he'd done the AT, end to end, a few years earlier and said he reckoned his total cost had been about \$12,000.

My room was nice, but the hotel had no restaurant (that's why it's called "Express") so it was delivery pizza or whatever the little convenience store next door had. I chose the latter and it wasn't very satisfactory. I had almost firmly decided to pull out, so I called a shuttle service and was quoted something like \$90 to the Asheville Airport. As I returned from a second trip to the convenience store, however, I met Moonshiner in front of the hotel! I hadn't seen him since we tented near each other by the Walnut Mountain Shelter. When I told him of my fairly strong inclination to drop out, he said he was taking a short break himself; he and his wife were driving to Florida tomorrow to spend a little time with relatives, and would be going right past Asheville. He invited me to ride along with them, and said it would be fine to let them know early tomorrow morning.

Monday, April 22 2013, began about 5:30 AM in my Erwin, TN Holiday Inn Express room as I wrapped up the final assembly of my REI Flash 62 pack, preparing for the flight home. Using the public computer in the lobby, I'd found there were frequent flights to my home airport — priced about 3 to 4 times what I'd have paid if I'd bought the ticket several months in advance, but you do what you have to do. I carry the backpack's detachable top pocket in a paper grocery or plastic bag, along with my Crocs, as my carry-on bag, and was able to fit the hiking poles (collapsed to about 26") into the pack's mesh side pockets, with a rope through their wrist straps encircling the upper part of the pack.

As I emerged from the elevator for breakfast, I met Chicago and Private Snowball, telling them of my bailing and wishing them well for the rest of their hike. A few minutes later I met Moonshiner and his wife, finalizing a time to meet and depart. It was a pleasant and fairly short drive down to Asheville, and it was a pleasure to get to know this nice couple a little better. In mid-morning I was ticketed and checked in, and was enjoying snacks and a new "Outside" magazine I'd bought. There was no problem with the flight, my wife picked me up at our airport, and I was home that evening.

Why did I bail? I think I was doing all right, pace-wise — I often ran into people who'd started about the same date that I did. I was a bit concerned about my right knee, but the double-hinged brace I'd obtained in Gatlinburg was allowing me to move fairly well. I suspect that I was just getting a little bored. Long, trudging ascent after long, trudging ascent... white blaze after white blaze... Perhaps the miserable wet and cold climb to Hogback Ridge Shelter — a day that Wonder Woman told me really adversely affected her husband Clark Kent too — had a lasting impact, or even the "treadmill" ascents (one pine-and-boulder peak after another) prior to the drop down into Erwin. I'd enjoyed the past six weeks, but the prospect of another five months simply was not appealing. Although I'm happy for acquaintances who have continued on, like Salsa and Twix, I do not recall (writing this 3 months later) any regret at pulling out. I have a full life here at home, with several hobbies that have fascinated me for many years, and am trying to keep in shape with long, vigorous walks and bicycle rides.

Some day, in the famous words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, "I'll be back."