

Background of the Appalachian Trail

In 1921, a regional planner named Benton MacKaye put a dream to paper by submitting his “An Appalachian Trail, A Project in Regional Planning,” to the October issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. MacKaye envisioned a continuous path that would traverse the crest of the Appalachian Mountain range, from its northern beginning in Maine to its southern terminus in Georgia, providing easy access to the solitude of wilderness for urbanites all over the Eastern United States. After publication of his article, MacKaye realized that many shared his ambitious dream, and a plethora of outdoor clubs came together to champion the cause, forming the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) in 1925. On October 15, 1938, after enlisting the aid of thousands of volunteers and financial benefactors, and the Civilian Conservation Corp, the last section of the trail was completed and the culmination of all their efforts was realized. This trail would be called the Appalachian Trail, “a continuous, marked footpath extending more than 2,150 miles from Katahdin, a granite monolith in the central Maine Wilderness, south to Springer Mountain in Georgia, mostly along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains.”

This trail has become an icon for outdoorsman all over the country, drawing individuals from all backgrounds and all areas of the country. It has become a beacon for those who wish to truly revel in nature, partaking of solitude and the peace it brings, “unique for the scenery and exclusive for the company you keep.” Since the early 1990’s about 200 hardy souls complete the trail each year, but few realize who was the first to undertake and complete such a task. In 1948 Earl Shaffer, a man recently back from World War II and disillusioned by his experiences, began walking, hoping that nature

could purge his soul of the images and pictures so fresh in his memory. He directed his walking towards a newly completed trail called the Appalachian Trail. Soon, he had made it to the Shenandoah Valley and sent a postcard of prose to the ATC, now headquartered in Washington DC. The Conference refused to believe it was possible for an individual to undertake and complete such an endeavor, seeing their trail as just a form of regional recreation. On August 5, 1948, Shaffer turned their logic on its head, reaching the icy pinnacle of Mt. Katahdin and becoming the first person to thru-hike the entire Appalachian Trail.

Introduction

For the media this was an event relegated to the area of human-interest stories, with them quickly picking up the story of a veteran hiking well over 2000 miles carrying only the bare necessities for survival, attempting to exorcise the demons of war. The Associated Press ran the story on their newswire, distributing it all over the country and facilitating the event's coverage by newspapers far and wide. The New York Times and the Boston Globe were the main outlets to cover Shaffer's triumph. I will analyze these papers' coverage of the event with the intention of comparing them to abundant subsequent secondary sources printed well after the completion of his monstrous feat. These secondary sources, including a book by David Emblidge called The Appalachian Trail Reader, explore the history, majesty, and intrigue of the trail, often highlighting the numerous contributions and achievements of none other than Earl Shaffer. By examining all aspects of how these two diverse forms of media choose to cover this historical event it is my intention to explore differences in primary and secondary

sources, looking at how both interpretations and perceptions regarding a specific event change over time.

Primary Coverage

On August 6, 1948, the Associated Press picked up on the details of Shaffer's arduous 2000-mile trek that culminated on Mt. Katahdin in Maine. The AP sent out the story and several media outlets picked it up, namely those in close proximity to the Appalachian Trail or the East Coast in general. In 1948, the full magnitude of this momentous event was not fully realized, with papers such as the New York Times and the Boston Globe considering the event only a simple blip in history thus allotting it only one day of coverage. It will be this set of papers which I will analyze in an attempt to gain a clear understanding of principle primary sources and their function and general role in the treatment of Earl Shaffer's 2000 mile jaunt in the Appalachian wilderness.

The New York Times (Primary Coverage)

The first example I wish to examine is that of the New York Times. The Times has established a reputation for covering extensive news from around the nation and around the world. The paper deemed the historic ramblings of a 29-year-old veteran noteworthy enough to constitute a small block in their national news section. They present a very condensed version of the story, beginning with the column headline: "Hikes Appalachian Trail-Man Who Left Georgia April 4 Tops Mount Katahdin in Maine." The article proceeds to identify its location as Millinocket, Me and the date as August 5th, presenting an extremely concise and straightforward account of Shaffer's exploits, a rapid succession of visual pictures. By all accounts this is a relatively simplistic article presenting a highly diluted version of the general who, what, when,

where, and what significance in regards to an event. The purveyor of action is identified as Earl Shaffer, a 29-year-old resident of York Pennsylvania. His feat is described as hiking the Appalachian Trail from Mt. Oglethorpe in Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine, with a brief description of the trail following. The Trail is not described in detail, assuming the audience is at least semi-familiar with it and the states and terrain it traverses. The actual time frame of the hike is described, stating that Shaffer left on April 4th and finished on August 5th. Some of the specifics in regards to the trail are detailed, going over his meal and cooking plan and his arrangements for sleeping and shelter, shedding light on the nature of the gear he carried. The article goes on to highlight a cross-section of his experiences, specifically noting his run-ins with poisonous snakes in Virginia and Pennsylvania respectively. The only personal comments by Shaffer are his thoughts on the magnitude of his achievement, saying of the trail that it was nothing “that anyone else couldn’t do.”

The brevity of the attention given to this, in my opinion very notable achievement, is surprising indeed, but I must keep in mind the time in which I live and the new information I have to work with. The enormity and numerous ramifications of what Shaffer accomplished are not fully realized at the time. The event is treated as a simple human-interest story, not as an environmental endurance achievement, as it is widely perceived today. The article fails to elaborate beyond the “bare bones” of the story. Noticeably, the character and profession of Shaffer are not explored, nor is it presented what a thru hike is defined as or what it entails, assuming the reader is readily familiar with the nature of the trail or feel this information is superfluous. For me news is current history, that is it should be presented in a different form and manner than ancient

history, focusing more directly on character development and elaboration rather than an ultra condensation of facts as one might expect from a history textbook. The New York Times and the Boston Globe treated Shaffer's unique achievement in this way. The question for me is why was it treated in this manner, when, as will be discussed later in the paper, people of the 1970s began viewing Shaffer as a guru, a champion of the wilderness and a pioneer of wilderness travel. I presume that because of the seemingly endless supply of newsworthy stories, it is impossible and not economically feasible for the New York Times to follow up on stories such as Shaffer's, even though to me, a student of today, there appears to be a vast untapped market of resources and angles one could utilize to provide more than one day of coverage; i.e.: pictures, interviews, maps, histories, etc.

The Boston Globe (Primary Coverage)

The Boston Globe offers very similar coverage of the event, but does present a slightly more developed story, including more facts but less anecdotes and direct quotations. The Globe keeps to the framework of the Associated Press Story as told by the New York Times, but goes on to add clarity to the picture by better describing Shaffer, the time element, and specifics of the hike. This story is however, not identified as having its source in the Associated Press and some small details solidify this impression in my mind. These details are all very small but they indicate that these two stories were not taken from the same mold; details such as whether it was generally believed that Shaffer was the first to complete the Trail, the position taken by The Globe, or that Shaffer himself is the only one who makes such a claim, the position of The Times. The Globe adds to the complete picture by informing the reader that Shaffer was

a World War II Veteran and provides them with some very specific details about his trip: “He started from Mt. Oglethorpe April 4, planning to reach Katahdin Aug. 4. He was one day over schedule. The trip, he said cost him \$250, mostly for food purchased along the way. He slept in the woods, lean-tos, and improvised shelters.” These accounts highlight many of the same things, emphasizing that which they thought was important at the time. It is interesting to note that both stories differ in the number they give for the length of the Trail with the Boston Globe claiming it to be 2050 miles while the New York Times stated that trail was 2000 miles in length. Another inconsistency in the two stories is that they spell Mt Oglethorpe in different ways, with The Boston Globe misspelling it. The overall feel of this article is that the Boston Globe sees Shaffer’s journey as a more historical event than does the New York Times, thus providing a more elaborate picture of the event. As will be shown later, the scope, importance, and interpretation of this event will change and evolve greatly in secondary sources of the future, clearly showing a great distinction in primary and secondary sources.

Secondary Sources

Books Regarding Earl Shaffer

Secondary sources abound in the realm of Appalachian Trail histories and discussions, with the majority of these sources providing detailed looks into the accomplishments of Earl Shaffer. Twenty to thirty years after the picayune coverage granted by the New York Times and other major media outlets, books, magazines, and other periodicals reached an epiphany regarding wilderness travel and recreation. They began to perceive events such as Shaffer’s 2000-mile trip as more than tales of novelty and more as achievements of the pioneering human spirit. There are a plethora of sources

that clearly give Shaffer credit for his contributions to recreation, elaborating on his life, work, and the true significance of his feat. In the following paragraphs I will explore a wide swath of secondary media including books, magazines, newspapers, and even an online interview. In a book entitled: The Appalachian Trail Reader, David Emblidge has gathered a collection of Appalachian Trail memoirs, with the work's highlight being that of none other than Earl Shaffer. Emblidge says of Shaffer:

“For some time the only one of his kind, Earl Shaffer was the first person to walk the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in one season (April 4-August 5, 1948). In his day the trail began at Mt. Oglethrope in Georgia. Choosing to go south to north set a precedent for thousands of would-be thru- hikers. The notion of hiking without detailed contour maps and guidebooks seems unthinkable today, but Shaffer was a tough and determined man with a goal clearly in mind.”

This “goal” was clearly defined as reaching the rocky precipices of Mount. Kathidin and the book proceeds to bring insight into the trip itself. Emblidge dwells a great deal on Shaffer's personal thoughts, preferring to allow Shaffer's words to speak for themselves into the rigors of long distance of long distance camping. This book takes the stance that Shaffer pioneered the art of outfitting for wilderness travel. General camping was well established and the accompanying gear was widely available, but it had yet to be perfected how to equip oneself for a long distance backpacking trip. One had only to look at the military of the time to get a view of how individuals can make themselves self-sustaining by way of what was on their backs. Shaffer, a World War II veteran, had seen the often cumbersome military gear and began to envision how an individual might combine lightweight and functionality to create an ameliorable combination for

backpacking, analyzing what the true necessities of individual survival actually were. This new knowledge would be reflected in the equipment he carefully chose for his trip in 1948. Emblidge tells the reader that Shaffer built his own sleeping bag, accounting for size and weight, doing the same for most of his other gear including carefully chosen clothing, boots, and toiletry articles. Hikers would follow his gear preferences for generations to come, with many of them looking to his memoirs to see types and amounts of food to take. Emblidge implies that Shaffer was also an innovator in the way of long distance food choices and preparation. Shaffer had much experience in MRE consumption from World War II and used that to discover a strong balance of food capable of packing and cooking in remote areas on a small stove.

This book goes on to examine the mindset of an individual who endures great hardships over the course of five months of loneliness. Shaffer is a well-versed and visibly well-educated individual, with this being evident in his description of hardship. Eldridge brings out the hardships of the trip, things such as weather, inadequate trail markers, snakes, and physical motivation. Eldridge aptly quotes Shaffer describing his hardships saying:

“Progress was hectic... Words fail to describe adequately some of the hardships undergone during prolonged rainstorms and alternating cold spells. Gradually the trail became a seemingly endless venture so that I was probably the most amazed of all when I finally reached Trail’s end. I often pondered whether the difficulties provided me with the impetus to carry on.”

The idea of traveling alone is also explored here, demonstrating how very trying but all the while fulfilling such a solo-journey could be. Eldridge looks at why Shaffer chose to

partake of the Appalachians alone, indicating that the person Shaffer had intended to hike with lost his life in World War II. Eldridge lets Shaffer speak for himself on the issue of solo hiking and solitude: “I had a very capable and congenial partner who was killed in the war and I never found another...for I would much rather take the risk of a lone expedition than chance a questionable companion.” This was one of many aspects which primary newspaper coverage failed to document, the aspect of the psychological condition of those involved.

Secondary Newspaper Coverage

Another prime example of the neglect shown to Shaffer’s initial accomplishment is an article written for the Standard Times on 8/11/98. The author, Jennifer Brown, gave her piece the headline: *Appalachian Trail’s first thru-hiker takes golden steps 50 years later*, a title indicating that 50 years ago a highly historic event took place. The author seems to both imply and presume that Shaffer received a fair amount of coverage in 1948 for, when, in fact, this article describing his third thru-hike is the first highly detailed newspaper story to cover his awe-inspiring milestone. The article constantly makes reference to Shaffer being the “first to forge the trail uninterrupted” and proceeds to explain just what this deed entailed. The author also delves into Shaffer’s motives for hiking the trail saying:

“Shaffer undertook his first hike to shake off the demons from World War II, which he spent fighting in the Pacific. His best friend from childhood was killed on the beach at Iwo Jima. “After the War, I couldn’t settle down to do anything. So I started walking,” Shaffer says. “People didn’t believe I could do the whole thing. No one ever had, so they thought it couldn’t be done.””

The article as a whole takes a somewhat sentimental look at Shaffer's life and deeds, discussing his three thru-hikes and his powerful effect on the American hiking community, aptly quoting Shaffer in regards to his perceived greatness: "Some people say I am legend. I don't know. I just keep going."

When searching for discussions of the life and times of Earl Shaffer in today's secondary sources it becomes evident that there is no lack of coverage about this trail-trotting Pennsylvania native. I will briefly explore a cross section of these sources, looking at several newspaper articles, a magazine feature, and an online interview with Shaffer himself. There are several newspaper articles that describe Shaffer's latest thru-hike as a senior citizen. One such example is an article by David Carriveau, writing for the Valley News in Lebanon, NH, a long feature piece focusing mainly on Shaffer's latest on foot triumph but clearly weaves a tapestry of his legendary status. Carriveau uses a tactful combination of examining both the deeds and character of Shaffer, presenting him to the reader as a modern day John Muir. This characterization is particularly appealing to an American public who has recently deemed outdoor recreation a highly chic activity. Carriveau insinuates how far the press has come in its feelings regarding Shaffer and his 1948 deed by quoting him in regards to his third thru-hike: "I was hoping to go at least halfway before letting the word out that I was trying to do it...reporters started catching up with me before I was even a third of the way, wanting to do stories." This go round on the trail, 50 years after his ground breaking story barely got coverage from major news outlets, reporters had taken to the Trail to follow him relentlessly. For me this is astonishing and bodes well in regards to proving my point that Earl Shaffer's journey was not fully realized in 1948.

Unique Secondary Coverage

Three unlikely sources that I deemed worthwhile in mentioning purely for their value in proving how very much primary coverage of an event can lay in stark contrast to secondary sources of later years, are an ABC.com online interview with Earl Shaffer, an article in the ATN (Appalachian Trailway News) Magazine, and a radio interview with Michael Feldman. The ABC.com online interview is particularly convincing in proving that Shaffer's reputation and legacy have changed a great deal since 1948. The interview titled: *Talking Trail with a Legend*, allowed internet users from all over the world to ask Shaffer questions, eliciting a variety of queries, but all give the impression that the supplicant held Shaffer in high regards as a hero. People asked a whole host of questions ranging from what boots he used, to his perceptions of the increased publicity of his last hike, and even questions regarding future hikes. One individual even drew parallels between John Glen and Shaffer, implying that both accomplished similar feats and later duplicated them at an old age. The simple fact that Earl Shaffer, an 80-year-old outdoor guru, has joined the ranks of movie, music, and political figures, as an online interviewee, is a testament to the media's realization of his interesting place in history. The Appalachian Trail magazine, ATN, provides a detailed article titled: *Board won't referee "First Thru-Hiker" Debate*, which actually questions whether Shaffer was actually the first to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail, stating that new information has surfaced leading them to believe that a group of boy scouts from New York may have completed the trip in 1936, even before the Trail was officially opened. If true, this has the possibility of besmirching Shaffer's hero status, but it also serves to reinforce my point that there was more to this news story in 1948 that was not adequately researched nor reported. The

final of these novelty secondary sources is a radio interview by radio show host Michael Feldman, who hosts *Whad'Ya Know?*, a broadcast syndicated all over the country.

Feldman interviewed Shaffer in 1998 after his final thru-hike, asking a variety of specific trail questions but interspersing words of praise and admiration throughout the interview, closing with the statement: “Your trip was a tremendous achievement...you’re another American hero.”

General Conclusions

Before a historical event can be adequately explored it must first be fully discovered. Many times primary and secondary coverage of just such an event are very dissimilar and varied, with the initial coverage providing the framework of the occurrence, while subsequent sources sometime down the road can provide additional insight and elaboration as a result of an extended time in which to ruminate on the event. It is my assessment that the treatment of Shaffer’s landmark deed in 1948 serves as an extreme example of the above hypothesis regarding the general nature of primary and secondary coverage. The event, while picked up by the Associated Press, was not covered in most newspapers nationwide and almost no national periodicals picked up the story. By the end of the 1970s, the media’s general perception of Shaffer and his accomplishment had evolved and an influx of books, articles, and interviews surfaced. These new stories came from secondary sources and were divergently different, seeking to build a new impression of Shaffer’s accomplishment.

The primary coverage of Earl Shaffer’s pioneering first thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail was very basic in nature and in my opinion, could almost be described as unduly sparse. Through my extensive research I have found only two examples of

primary coverage of the event, the Boston Globe and the New York Times. Each of these presents a simplistic who, what, when, where, and what significance of Shaffer's first thru-hike, quoting a portion the New York Times coverage: "MILLINOCKET, Me., Aug 5- A 29-year-old York, Pa, man, Earl Shaffer, bestrode Mount Katahdin's mile-high summit today, the first hiker, he believes to plod the Appalachian Trail's entire 2000-mile route. Arriving at the mountain's base last night, he said he left Oglethorpe, Ga., April 4 and averaged seventeen miles a day." The brevity of this article is suspect to me because of the new information that I now possess from reading the more recent secondary coverage of the event. There is a an absolute surfeit of interviews, quotes, history, angles, and interesting facts left almost wholly untapped by the primary coverage. The secondary sources begin to fittingly utilize quotation, constantly tapping the words of Shaffer. Through this elaboration, personal thoughts, recollections, and personal character are explored, while a clearer picture of the event is painted. The New York Times and Boston Globe offer very few actual quotes and give no evidence of interviews, while today millions online all over the world are interviewing Shaffer. It is interesting to me that primary sources did not see fit to mention a general history of the more than interesting Trail, nor provide any maps or adequate geographical resources. The secondary coverage I discovered usually provided detailed maps of the trail route, establishing its beginning, terminus, and highlights along the way. In my opinion it is odd that the primary coverage does not touch upon the Trail's very intriguing history of the trail; the individuals behind it, its actual construction, and its general purpose. Almost every piece of secondary coverage included a fairly detailed history of the trail, providing names and dates of benefactors and benchmarks in its history.

In the fifty years that it took for Shaffer to receive due credit for his achievement, American society changed and the media followed suit. In the first half of the 20th Century, those who traveled on foot and carried their belongings with them were viewed with scorn, labeled as vagrants or lawless ramblers. Shaffer, a veteran and college educated schoolteacher, broke this mold and ameliorated the relationship between the general public and those who sought recreation in the outdoor activities of hiking and backpacking. It is possible, at least in my mind, that the media's reluctance to cover such an event stemmed from society's disinclination to see accomplishment in something they once considered reckless and indicative of itinerant behavior. In the last ten years, American society has come to cherish communing with nature in all ways possible, anything from rafting, to backpacking, and even rock climbing. Sport Utility Vehicles have come to prominence and the "outdoor look" is in style, with consumers gobbling up brands such as North Face, sporting cargo shorts and outdoor shirts on a regular basis. The CBS program "Survivor" has introduced the American public to wilderness interactions and sparked an interest for outdoor adventure. I venture to say that Shaffer was one of the early pioneers who ushered in the acceptance of extreme outdoor recreation by presenting a favorable image of moral character to the wilderness traveler. Hindsight is of course 20/20 and there was virtually no way for primary sources to envision the status Earl Shaffer might come to possess but they could have further explored his journey and granted more coverage to a highly interesting and worthy event. In this case, secondary coverage served to shore up the shaky foundation of 1948's coverage, shedding light on the true nature of Shaffer's contributions to outdoor recreation.

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Earl Shaffer: The First Solo Thru-Hiker of the Legendary Appalachian Trail

*There's a lone footpath along the crest
Of the Appalachian Chain,
On the cloud-high hills so richly blest
With sun and wind and rain*

-Earl Shaffer

Graham Fields

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