

Editor's note: After much debate we have decided to present this letter verbatim; that is, no changes have been made to any grammar, punctuation, or spelling, in order to present Avery's voice accurately. There are many, many errors in word use, spelling, usage, and grammar. The argument is valid - but the presentation is flawed. The scan of the original is nearly illegible, so we have typeset it here for readability. But we have tried to present it as close to the original as possible in this web format.

Washington, D.C.,
December 19, 1935.

My dear Benton:

I did not expect to be so long in acknowledging your letter of November 20th, but I have been out of town on business much of the time, and when here, my evenings have been occupied with important Trail matters. In addition, we have in the press the 250-page second edition of the Maine Guidebook, as well as work on the Guide to the Southern Appalachians. It requires constant work to keep things moving along the two-thousand mile stretch of the Trail.

It was with the greatest of regret that we realized that he, who had conceived the Appalachian Trail, had consciously placed himself at the disposal of the elements which have attempted to wreck the project and prevent its completion. By this, we, of course, do not mean that those who disagree with our views, or who will not work with us, are necessarily working against the Trail - far from it - but the personal attacks, gross misrepresentation of facts, intolerance, and abuse which have, of late, been showered upon the active workers in the Trail project have disillusioned many with the spirit of the hiking groups. It has had a bad effect on the project. This applies not only to the general public, but to the workers themselves. I, for one, am thoroughly disillusioned and disgusted.

Along with your letter I found other communications, which make this gratuitous Trail work so satisfactory. An official is complaining of the conduct of hikers; if you have ever traveled the existing Trail and seen the abuse of shelters, etc., you would wonder if, under the skin, the hiker and the tin-can motorist are not often closely akin. In another letter an alleged hiker is complaining of improper maintenance and unmarked trail, resulting in his getting lost. This individual concludes by assuring me that my interest in the Trail and my activity are merely "academic" and tells how the job should be done. Your letter, however, defines my "ailment" as "connectivitis", states the "issues between us"; assigns to me a point of view and then proceeds to demolish it. However, you will have to take full responsibility for this diagnosis; it is your fantasy - nothing of mine.

Perhaps I should tell you what I think the Trail should be, although it ought to be unnecessary to define the requirements of the Trail to anyone who has ever traveled trails or has any familiarity with the forests of the eastern United States. All of this has been clearly set forth, for years, in the official A.T. Trail Manual. We have endeavored to follow it. I appreciate that I suffer the handicap of being unable to discuss trail maintenance on the basis of pure theory; my observations are my conclusions derived from experience of over seven years during which I suppose I have labored in the field constructing and maintaining it, and at the desk, as much as any one individual. During that time I have also seen the route. Not as a stunt, Benton, but to know, on the ground, conditions with which I was attempting to deal.

Primarily, the Trail must be marked with sufficient distinctiveness so that it may be readily followed at all times. Nothing is more disconcerting and annoying to a hiker than a succession of difficulties and constant uncertainties as to whether or not he is on the route. One can imbibe little of the "primeval influence", appreciate the forest growth, geology, or the views if he must be constantly on the alert to prevent becoming lost through the unaccountable vagaries

of the trail maintainers. For this reason, experience has dictated the use of paint blazes on trees, rocks, etc., to insure an absolutely unmistakable route. If you have ever experienced the Southern Appalachian amateur trails in summer, you could not fail to accept the accumulated experience that its use is indispensable and unavoidable. The criticism has been made that this use of paint is an intrusion upon the naturalness of the surroundings. Knowing of no comment from you, like the rest of us, I assume you appreciate the necessity for paint blazes. What constitutes an intrusion upon the naturalness involves an interesting difference of opinion. The National Park Service landscape architects are of the opinion that a worked open footway should be the only indication of the route. (Hikers look around them and not on the ground, they say.) So they abhor the paint blazes and markers and forbid the the former in the national parks. You abhor the leveled footway. Both parties sincerely attempt to preserve the naturalness of the trail's surroundings and differ in their estimate of how it is to be accomplished. The alternatives are an unmistakable, permanent, external marking, or a leveled, maintained footway with protected, permanent signs at junctions.

Such a trail must be clear vertically and horizontally for travel and for vision. Considering maintenance problems, three feet is a minimum; accumulated experience has shown that four feet is buy far more satisfactory. In the P.A.T.C. early days, some of our theorists talked of rabbit-width trails; they too have learned, with the labor of the years. Every effort must be made to develop shelters and accommodations. Approaches must be developed and marked. Only last June, Paul Fink re-emphasized the necessity for telling people that the Trail is here. But once lured to it, people must find it an open, marked, and maintained route; otherwise it becomes a travesty. We must, too, pay some attention to the physical aspect of the route. The trail must be possible for the average tramper. Much of it today is actually dangerous. Because a peak has a 45% rise from a gap over a boulder slope is no reason to force the hiker through this route. Such trail routing soon breeds a distaste for woods walking. All this seems so evident as the goal of our efforts that I should not need to elaborate on it.

You seem to have drifted from the original conception of what would be "an endless pathway leading ever onward through the wilderness of our eastern mountain regions." Of course, everyone who has ever traversed the ranges from Maine to Georgia knows that the term "wilderness" is comparative, that in the East there is nowhere true wilderness, no primal environment. This term "wilderness" belongs to the far west. There are only a few limited regions in the east which are of this type. All the land has passed into private ownership; economic conditions control its being lumbered or otherwise exploited. The Maine wilderness shows everywhere - in its old tote-roads, cut-over land signs of man; even in the Smokies cabins are to be found, sometimes in ruins, in many hollows; and an examination of the records shows there is almost no acre that has not at one time been occupied and used by white men. Some sections today are even wilder than in 1920; some less so; the balance oscillated. You knew this when you first proposed the Trail. For instance, you discussed with [Schmeckowier](#) (???) how the Trail could cross the cultivated Shenandoah Valley. You did not then suggest a thousand disconnected units, having merely a common direction. It was a unified single project in which people were interested. But just as for all practical purposes a Trail from Maine to Georgia is endless, so to the urban dweller of the East, a Trail along the "mountain ranges of the East" was through a "wilderness". We cannot run a Trail for its length through an actual wilderness, for there is none. We can and are trying to make a connected footway, cleared, and marked, through the wooded, scenic sections of our mountains nearest to the Coast, and stretching the length of the Coast. In this master Trail there are extensive trail sections leading through isolated regions (where there are such); others, as in New York, in such frequented places and necessarily over roads rather than over plowed fields.

As I understand your present theory, anything which does not have the required wilderness surroundings is not "Appalachian Trail". We should leave such areas as gaps in the Trail. They should not be marked. We need not inquire how any practical use can be made of such a route or how one could be directed into a wilderness sections or led out of it; it just isn't Appalachian Trail. In your view the paint and markers should come off of hundreds of sections which are sub-standard (your view) and countless unconnected sections of short trail exist permanently. Our goal is constant improvement. We are succeeding. Unsatisfactory sub-standard sections and roads are being eliminated steadily and will be. Last week, due to changed conditions, the P.A.T.C. eliminated, by a woods trail, some three miles of dirt road just over the Pennsylvania line. During the year the Club has eliminated six other miles. In Massachusetts you condemned our detouring of East Mountain by back roads in order to get the hiker from the Taconics into the state forests to the north. Well, the Berkshire Chapter has been laboring for two years now to open a route across East Mountain. You were at the Gould Farm on this section, for a considerable time, and I am sure that, if the problem there could have been solved, you would have worked on the trail and have shown how to do it.

The purpose of the Appalachian Trail Conference, as stated in its constitution, is to make and maintain the Appalachian Trail. It is this I and the other workers in the Conference and various Trail Clubs are endeavoring to do. And there is no reason we should be berated because we do not also attempt to do other things, under the guise of providing a different environment for the Trail. There are limits to our amateur abilities. It takes little effort to criticize and much to accomplish.

I understand that you disapprove of the use on the Trail of the Government agencies such as the C.C.C., saying that the primeval environment benefits which accrue to the workers are thereby lost. Of course, you are not aware of the results accomplished in Maine. Had you ever worked on the Trail - expended money and incessant time - packed 60 pound loads and camped out in rains - and cut your way through dense tangles for twelve hours a day - such as Greene and the Maine workers (mostly from Washington) and countless others have done, you might well appreciate the reaction to such armchair suggestions. We do not want to monopolize such benefits; we regret the disinclination of others to share the work.

I do wish those who talk so much about the "footless" Trail and the "wilderness" Trail would really go out on the Trail, not just for an afternoon, but to traverse it, day after day; camp on it; see what it is like and its actual environment. They would find much to open their eyes, and I think those who are endeavoring to make and maintain the Trail would come in for less criticism - and would possibly receive more cooperation. In some places they would find that, especially in the New York-New Jersey sections, the trail is necessarily through the countryside and over roads; in some, as in the central Shenandoah, it frequently comes near (though seldom within sound of, except at actual crossings) a motor road, though here there is the compensation of a succession of breath-taking views not otherwise possible; but in other sections it is far from the haunts or sights and sounds of man. Unfortunately for those of us who are trying to maintain the Trail, where it is distant from roads, it is used so seldom that it is most discouraging to the workers on the project.

To the Skyland Conference you sent a denunciation of the new Park Service trail without ever having seen the old or the new. You did not, of course, know that it provided a system of shelters and eliminated ten miles of hard dirt roads. Like new wood roads, only two months old, these trails appear raw when built, but what you didn't know is that, already in one season, much of this has become overgrown to the extent that experienced hikers, know to you, become lost from the Trail. And the Park Service officials point to such an unworn condition of the Trail as indicating the lack of use of or interest in trails. We have no

answer; this particular section was our old route from Marys Rock across Pinnacle Mountain. Your familiarity with the new England woods should tell you how quickly these section mature and become ingrown.

In so many regions people find the A.T. disappointingly poor, badly marked and maintained; the project suffers. You can't appreciate the constant battle to keep it maintained. The paradox seems to be that in those sections where the sponsors do the greatest lip service to the Trail and the wilderness, invariably they permit their trails to deteriorate. You would be interested to know that the New York-New Jersey section came in for caustic violent criticism, because of its deteriorated condition, in the October issue of Walking Magazine.

You speak of "such time as you can give to the A.T." I know of no one who should have more. You have leisurely employment, under no pressure or responsibilities. Our A.T. workers are limited. This fall I have averaged two days a week here. The day your epistle came - thanks to generously donated stenographic labor - forty letters, next day twenty, all necessary to accomplish something with respect to the Trail, went out. This afternoon I mailed out paint and markers; tomorrow I address envelopes. If someone fails to receive a program when he thinks he should receive a program - if his name was on the list - I receive a tirade, such as from Harvey Broome last summer.

Your reference to my letter of August 7, 1934, does not bring back very happy recollections. At that time I was attempting to get the trail in Southern Virginia, if interfered with by the road, rebuilt in a more secure, improved location. Naturally, I turned to all from whom I could expect help; hence wrote you for assistance. Your response in the form of your letter to [Cammerer???????](#) was a practical repudiation of my proposals or authority to advance them; it might well have ended my efforts. Now the problem in lower Virginia would have been solved and the Trail rebuilt, if the Drive is built, seems to have been of little moment to you; these maintenance labors are none of your problems. I fear that I must say that no thanks are due you for our long-delayed, eventual success in our efforts.

One lesson that Shenandoah experience has taught us and that is the advantage of high flank-line trails. For miles our ridge-crest old route was in the woods with neither view nor variety. The new location on the edge of the escarpment - whatever its disadvantages - has, it must be admitted by any fair-minded observer, a constant succession of breath-taking views. (Many times we have observed these advantages, although amateur efforts cannot hang trails on the edge of an escarpment.) You, at one time, advocated flank-line roads. Engineers have said to us that a flank-line road means a wide, deep slash on the mountain slope almost its entire length, with enormous expense for filling ravines or constructing bridges and that the resulting "scar" would be far in excess of the crest-line construction with more serious dangers of extensive erosion. Their conclusion was that the road should be on top or in the valley. I assume that you have considered these engineering problems.

Right here in Washington there are those who rejoice that the Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah Park has made it possible to drive down, leave the car on the Drive, and taking pack and sleeping bag, hike over the mountains and down the hollows ten to fifteen miles, camp for the night, and the next day return by another route, having a circuit hike of twenty to thirty miles in the two days - and that with the Drive, every week-end for a year could be spent without ever covering the same territory twice, while prior to the Drive the two-day trips were limited to about five or six localities.

I suppose that Anderson's article in Appalachia, portraying a grossly distorted and erroneous account of the wreckage of P.A.T.C. trail country, will have your

approval for its invection against skyline drives. Those who read it will naturally assume it authoritative and shun the region. When I recall our efforts, extensive in time and money, by articles, guidebooks, and exhibitions, to induce people to travel Blue Ridge trails and appreciate how mistaken zeal can destroy all of our efforts, I consider it tragic.

Do you recall the year of 1926? Looking back through Author Perkins' Conference records, which came to me, I find that in 1926 you were "Field Manager". That is, eight years ago you held the job which I am carrying on now. The results of that year might make you somewhat more charitable in evaluating your successors. For, in all kindness, we must admit that in early 1927 the project was practically dead. But for Authur Perkins, it would never have been revived. The trail worked ????, too. little realizes its debt to him. After his passing, I think that you must admit that the project would have scarcely survived except on limited areas, or have been extended except for the activity of P.A.T.C. members, against whose leadership, at Torray's??? request, you warned the Conference.

It is very pleasant to sit quietly home and talk of a primeval wilderness, and to think of a Trail that will make and maintain itself. But to bring such a Trail into being requires hard work, hours of labor under broiling suns and pouring rains, camping out in all kinds of weather, as well as almost incessant "office work" in connection with guidebooks, maps, markers, publicity, and a thousand and one other details. It is, don't you think, significant that the majority of those who are loudest in their demands and in their abuse of workers, have covered but little of the Trail and have done little physical labor on it. Those who actually hike on the Trail, not those who have been taken to it and shown sections here and there, but those who have scouted its location, cut it, marked it, and who go week after week and year after year to keep it cleared, are entitled to as much consideration for their views as those who sit at home and write about it, or ride out in cars and look at it where it is nearest to a roadway.

The Skyline Drive has been built in the northern and central sections of the Park. It might be of interest to you to know that, taking advantage of developments, I have asked that a hearing be held on a substitute valley route which will leave the southern portion of the Park a wilderness for hikers the same as eastern Smoky. We try to do something, Benton, beside pass resolutions, write letters and articles. But what we can do must necessarily depend on the project and the circumstances. Here I fear we are too late. Half a year ago, if some of the "conservation" groups had come forward with a concrete suggestion, it might have been in time. The situation is perhaps the reward for the tactics employed during the past year where our energies have been dissipated in fending off attacks and conspiracies.

The Trail in Georgia requires intensive marking. Visitors to the southern terminus of the Trail see no A.T. markings and would not know of Mt. Oglethorpe's connection with the Trail. An indication of real progress comes with Carter Whitaker's appointment of trail sponsors to definitely mark and maintain the Trail here. I know of your many visits to this group. You will perform a service to the Trail if you will, in your talks to them, impress upon them the necessity of a properly marked and maintained Trail. Is that asking too much?

You are correct in saying that the physical aspects of the Skyline Drive are not its worst features. It has disillusioned many with the spirit of the hiking groups. It has resulted in an exhibition of intolerance, selfishness, fanaticism, and internal discord which is almost past conception. Those who have attempted to go forward have been subjected to unbelievable abuse and libel. After all, it is a fact and not a theory that confronts us. This back-to-nature movement is tied up in the minds of the public with the thought of the motor car. You know, as

well as I do, that passing resolutions and everlastingly talking is of little use. We must be ready to take action, when action can do good; but the obstructionist attitude merely creates antagonism in the mind of the public against the out-of-door groups. We are endeavoring to build not only a physical trail but to develop in the urban population the realization of the benefits to be obtained from seeking that Trail and following it. We can never create that feeling if we present a spectacle of fanaticism, selfishness, or intolerance. I cannot see why it is not possible for us all to work in harmony toward our objective in the Trail project, even if there are differences of opinion as to the best means to the end. Why those who differ in their views cannot also attempt to accomplish something rather than dissipate their energies against those who do not go along with them is unanswerable.

Sincerely yours,

Mr. Benton Mackaye,
Knoxville, Tennessee