

# Three Decades of Protecting Our Nation's Trails

*Since American Hiking Society's creation in 1976, its path to success hasn't always been a smooth one. Here is a look at some of the struggles and victories along the way, as well as some of the people who have guided the journey.*

By William Kemsley, Jr.

**W**HEN THE environmental movement burst forth in the early 1970s, it overshadowed a crisis in America's foot trails. A five-fold increase in new backpackers coincided with a boom in snowmobiles, dirt bikes, and off-road vehicles—all during a time when the number of miles of trails was diminishing.

The silence of the woodlands was shattered by the roar of motorized vehicles as they took over many miles of the more easily accessible footpaths. Land managers in the National Park Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management recognized the problem and tried their best to deal with it, but they were at the mercy of pressures from vehicle users and their powerful industry supporters. The managers got no help from anyone—including hikers—in protecting hikers' interests. They did the best they could with what they had.

Amidst the causes of the day—the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, and the broader environmental movement—trails were way down the list of concerns. Everyone thought someone else would take care of the foot trails.

## Why American Hiking Society Was Born

When I started *Backpacker* magazine, I began receiving several management master plans a week from public land managers asking for input on trails and trail management. I studied the first of these and responded. But I quickly realized it would be all I could do to respond to half of them if I had nothing else to do.

Then one day, shortly after *Backpacker* began publication, Destry Jarvis, the legislative representative of the National Parks and Conservation Association, told me that the Appalachian Trail Oversight Bill was being considered by the U.S. Senate. He suggested I get some hiking folks

to come down to D.C. to testify on the Appalachian Trail's behalf. I made a number of phone calls and was amazed at my ineffectiveness.

All the major environmental organizations—Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, National Wildlife Federation, Audubon Society—told me they were deeply involved in far bigger environmental issues, and that hiking was a lower priority.

So I called the hiking clubs located near the AT corridor along the Eastern Seaboard, asking them to testify. Their response was generally lukewarm. The only person I had called who showed up for the hearings was Jim Kern, founder of the Florida Trail. Of course Destry was there, as was Paul Pritchard, executive director of the Appalachian Trail Conference.

After the hearings Jim and I said in chorus, "There needs to be a national trails organization." Paul agreed. I asked Jim if he would be willing to lead such an organization, and he surprised me with the readiness of his answer. Before spring flowers bloomed, Jim got Paul and me together in Brevard, North Carolina, in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains.

That was the founding



**In the 1970s, Bill Kemsley, Jim Kern, and Paul Pritchard (left to right) were key founders of American Hiking Society and instrumental in its early development.**

meeting of American Hiking Society. We came to agreement on a set of by-laws, a list of goals, and a detailed plan for building a national organization. We dreamed up an ideal board of directors. The three of us were joined by Congressman Goodloe Byron and Louise Marshall, publisher of a Pacific Northwest hikers' newsletter, *Signpost*. Chuck Sloan was roped in as our attorney. The launching board was intact.

### **American Hiking's First Victory**

Even before we formed an official legal entity, American Hiking Society held a couple of critical meetings to oppose an excise tax on hiking equipment that had been moving quietly through the congressional legislative machinery. It was an innocent enough proposal by well-meaning conservationists who thought that since so many people hiked, the tax would be an excellent way of funding important conservation measures.

We felt the excise tax, while being enacted for a worthy purpose, would unfairly place the entire burden upon hikers, only one outdoors group, when all outdoors people would benefit. So we lobbied against the measure. Defeating that legislation was American Hiking's first success.

In the meantime, Sloan was busy doing his pro bono work. He drew up our legal papers so that, on October 13, 1976, we signed the documents signifying there was a new force on the national hiking scene. And a month later, on November 19, we held our first official board meeting.

The first board was composed of Congressman Byron, James Kern, William Kemsley, Louise Marshall, Paul Pritchard, and William Ruskin, founder of the National Hiking and Ski Touring Association. The advisory board included Boyd Evison, superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park; David Richie, Appalachian Trail project manager for

the National Park Service; Robert Lucas, Forest Service head of research on recreation land management; and William Holman, head of trails management for the Forest Service.

We held the first annual membership meeting in March 1978 at Chuck Sloan's office. The first 30 American Hiking members crowded into that small space, adopted our by-laws, and elected Jim Kern president. One of the new members, Glenn T. Seaborg, the Nobel laureate former head of the Atomic Energy Commission under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, introduced a motion for American Hiking to take seriously our chatter about a hike from the Pacific Coast to the Atlantic and offered to work out logistics for the hike across California. HikaNation was born on that day.

### **The HikaNation Walk Across America Begins**

At *Backpacker* magazine, we publicized the event, inviting hikers to join in the hike wherever they could. Kern started a newsletter to keep everyone informed of the hike's progress. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and the Department of the Interior's Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service endorsed HikaNation.

The official kickoff occurred in 1980, when the 87 who had signed up for the hike across America got together at an American Hiking meeting in San Francisco. The next morning several hundred of us dipped our boots in the Pacific Ocean and began the eastward trek.

Among this throng were 36 of the original 87 who now began the long march in earnest, intending to go the entire distance to the Atlantic. Fifteen of them made it all the way. Several of the original group took breaks here and there because of sickness or personal affairs and rejoined the hike along the way or at the end.

The oldest to hike the full distance was 69-year-old John Stout. The

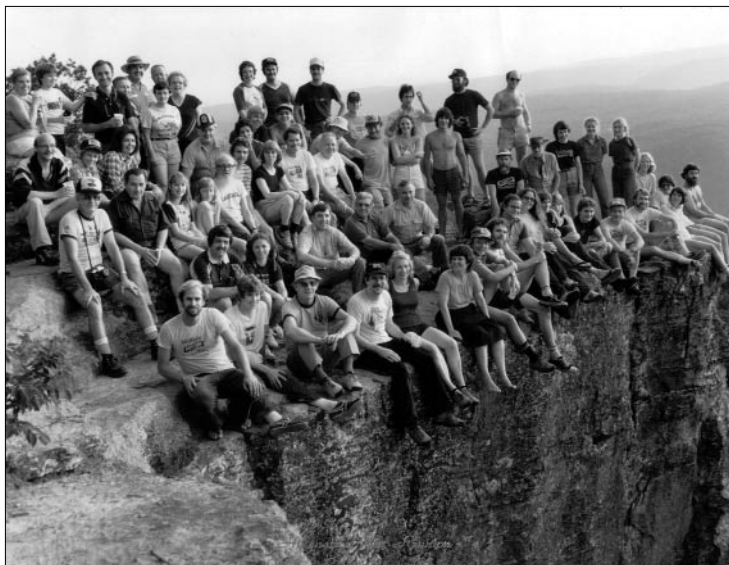
***“Congratulations to American Hiking Society on providing 30 years of leadership in protecting and promoting trails for hiking in America. American Hiking Society has been a stalwart champion for the the National Trails System—America’s premier scenic, historic, and recreation trails—through dozens of Volunteer Vacations and National Trails Day events and countless hours of advocacy over the years. The institution of and strong support for Hike the Hill, the annual Trails Advocacy Week in Washington, D.C., has provided a tremendous service for the users, sustainers, and lovers of trails throughout America. May the next 30 years bring ever greater success to American Hiking Society’s good endeavors.”***

**—Gary Werner  
Partnership for the National  
Trails System**

### **Hiking FUN FACTS**

The rings of a tree are always farther apart on the tree's southern side. Woodsmen often read tree rings to find the compass points.

TM ERNST



Right: HikaNation participants joined with other hikers on the U.S. Capitol steps in Spring 1981, then continued on to Cape Henlopen, Delaware—the hike’s final destination. Above: a HikaNation reunion in Arkansas in 1984.



youngest, Jamie Pyle, learned to walk on the HikaNation route and was on her own feet with the rest of the Hika-Nation group as they walked up the U.S. Capitol steps to be welcomed by a congressional delegation. The group was joined there by a contingent of other hikers to hoof it to the hike’s final destination—Cape Henlopen, Delaware—where they dipped their boots into the Atlantic.

### American Hiking Society Gets a Second Wind

One hiker who trod the entire 4,236-mile HikaNation route, Susan “Butch” Henley, felt the need for American

Hiking was so great that she joined the board, then worked as administrative director for ten years at little to no pay, putting in 60 to 80 hours a week keeping the records, organizing, and following through on legislative matters.

But no matter what American Hiking did in those years, it simply could not build membership to more than a few thousand and was astonishingly unsuccessful in attracting any significant number of hiking clubs to join the effort. Trails at the national level simply did not have any sex appeal.

Nevertheless, American Hiking

began to wield influence in Washington. One of its most notable achievements was leading a coalition of organizations in getting the National Trails System Act Amendment signed into law in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan. It established three new national scenic trails—Florida, Potomac Heritage, and Natchez Trace.

Despite this success, American Hiking was faltering. In the winter of 1988, Chuck Sloan and I bumped into each other in the Catskill Mountains,

## American Hiking Society • ORGANIZATIONAL MILEPOSTS

American Hiking Society is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) and holds its first board meeting.

1976

Volunteer Vacations™ becomes an official program of American Hiking Society

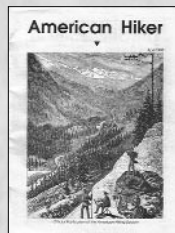
1978

American Hiking kicks off HikaNation, a coast-to coast walk starting in San Francisco to increase awareness about hiking trails.

1980

First issue of *American Hiker* magazine published

1988



American Hiking and *Backpacker* magazine found the American Discovery Trail

1989

American Hiking and SnowSports Industries America create Winter Trails®

1995

American Hiking Society establishes National Trails Day®

1993

where we discussed the sad plight of the organization. Chuck agreed to take his turn at the wheel.

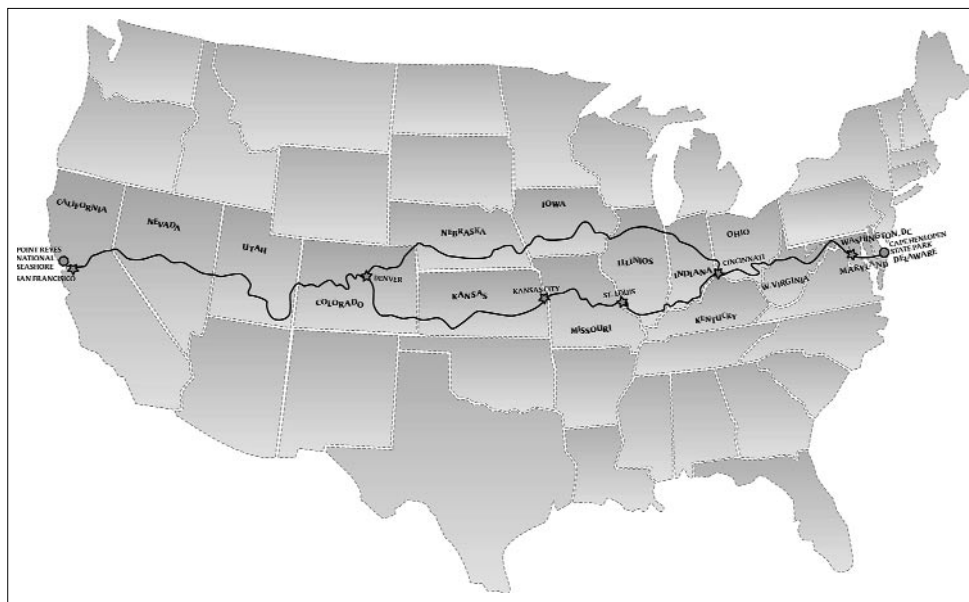
That was a stroke of luck for the hiking community. In a few years, Chuck breathed life back into American Hiking, obtained contributions to hire our first paid staff, and launched a number of impressive activities before he stepped aside for other leaders to take over.

### American Hiking Founds the American Discovery Trail (ADT)

On Chuck Sloan's first day in office in 1989, *Backpacker* editor John Viehman and its publisher Peter Spiers suggested that American Hiking Society develop a coast-to-coast trail linking principal north-south trails and the shorter local and regional trails into a nationwide network. The idea appealed to American Hiking because of its success with HikaNation in 1980.

While the ADT was conceived as a hiking trail, many sections would be appropriate for bicyclists and equestrians. The concept was described by American Hiking and *Backpacker* magazine as a "Route 66 for the self-propelled."

An ad hoc group was formed to raise funds and identify the route. Eric Seaborg and Ellen Dudley were appointed as field crew, and they began scouting the route over a 14-month



**The American Discovery Trail, conceived by American Hiking and *Backpacker* magazine in 1989, links many trails into a coast-to-coast network.**

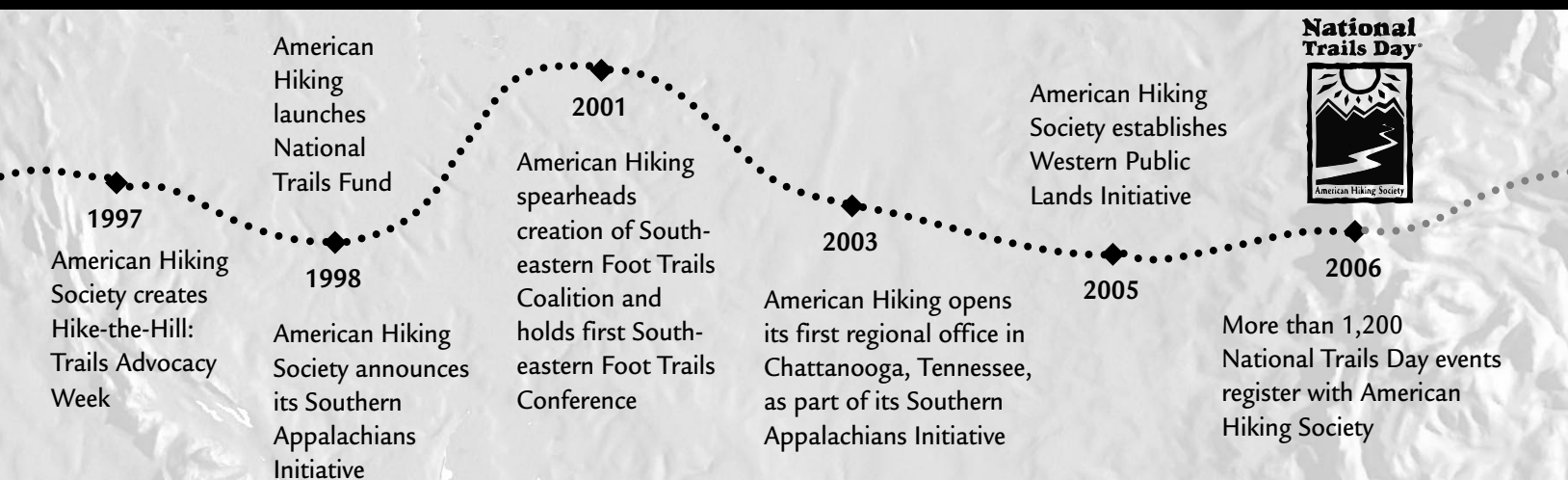
period in 1990 and 1991. American Hiking worked with Congress to pass the legislation for a feasibility study to move the ADT toward congressional designation as a national trail. The ADT was a program of American Hiking for seven years until it was turned over to the newly organized American Discovery Trail Society in 1996.

Since then, many have hiked, run, and bicycled long sections of the trail. In 2002 and 2003, Joyce and Peter Cottrell, a couple in their 50s, were the first to hike the ADT along the entire official route. Along the way, the Cottrells hiked through 14 national parks and 16 national forests and traversed five national scenic trails, 10

national historic trails, 23 recreational trails and 10,000 points of historic, scenic, cultural, and natural significance.

### Partnership for the National Trails System Is Formed

American Hiking quietly went about its business of forming trail coalitions with other organizations and government agencies. In 1992, we held the first meeting of the national scenic and historic trails organizations, with representatives of 16 of the 17 trails groups in attendance. As national coordinator of the American Discovery Trail and an 18-year member of the Appalachian Trail Confer-



ence finance committee, Reese Lukei was sought out by others at the meeting, particularly Gary Werner of the Ice Age Trail and Leo Rasmussen of the Iditarod Trail.

In an evening session that stretched into the wee hours of the morning, all 16 representatives pumped Reese's wisdom more fully, discussing how to persuade Congress to fund all of the congressionally designated trails. They finally agreed to operate as a Committee of 17, with Gary Werner heading it up under the wing of the American Hiking Society.

Since then the group, now known as the Partnership for the National Trails System, has grown to include 28 member organizations and has succeeded in obtaining funding for all national scenic and historic trails.

### National Trails Day

It may not be possible to identify in whose head National Trails Day (NTD) was hatched. When Chuck Sloan asked that a long-range plan be developed for American Hiking, Butch argued for National Trails Day's inclusion in the plan. Peter Spiers of *Backpacker* magazine was right by her side pushing for it. He and *Backpacker* editor John Viehman offered the magazine's financial support, which enabled National Trails Day's successful launch.

In its first year, 1993, National Trails Day attracted more than a million participants. Each year since then, NTD has occurred on the first Saturday of June, with hikes, educational activities, and new trail openings. In 2006, more than 1,200 NTD events

were held in all 50 states, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

### National Trails Fund

Bob and Dee Leggett figure prominently among the most dedicated, dili-



**Since its creation 13 years ago, National Trails Day has grown into a highly successful annual event, with events in all 50 states, Canada, and Puerto Rico.**

gent, and strategic of our supporters. Bob served on the American Hiking board for more than ten years and, together with his wife Dee, provided considerable funding for a number of important American Hiking projects, including the Alliance of Hiking Organizations, the Partnership for the National Trails System, its website, and all-important operational support. But one of their most important and lasting contributions was helping to launch the National Trails Fund. Since 1998, the fund has provided more than \$290,000 to trail organizations for land acquisition, tools, supplies, and trail marking.

### American Hiking Society Today

From 2000 to early 2005, American Hiking Society was guided under the proficient leadership of Chuck Sloan's daughter, Mary Margaret Sloan, who grew up hiking in the United States

and Europe. First as conservation director, then as president, Mary Margaret helped nurture the organization into the most authoritative voice for trails in the nation with a streamlined, efficient operation, ranking it among the most respected conservation organizations. In March 2005, the American Hiking board selected Gregory Miller as its new president. Greg brought to American Hiking more than 20 years of experience in conservation and a life-long passion for hiking.

American Hiking has grown into an impressive organization representing 240 local clubs at the national level, for a combined membership of more than 500,000 hikers. As a nonpartisan organization, it believes

that cooperation is the most effective means of achievement. Hikers cross all layers of the political spectrum, and those sympathetic to the trails' needs often include many whose only trail experience is reading about it.

Over the past 30 years, American Hiking Society has made a huge difference on behalf of the nation's trails and all the hikers who enjoy them. Throughout this special anniversary issue, you will discover how this organization has served effectively as the voice of America's hikers for the past three decades.

*Founder of Backpacker magazine and co-founder of American Hiking Society, William Kemsley is considered by many to be the father of modern hiking and backpacking. This article includes excerpts from Kemsley's forthcoming book, The Backpacker and Hiker's Handbook: An Authoritative Guide.*