



At ATC Headquarters in Harpers Ferry in March 1983. Kneeling: Ginger Doyle and Thurston Griggs. Second row, from left: Ruth Blackburn, Ed Garvey, Gail Miller, Charles Alsobrook, Violet MacPhee, Cindy Ross, Albie Pokrob, Warren Doyle and Larry Van

Meter. Third row, from left: Wayne Sellman, Don Pelletier, Laura Cramer, Steve Markiewicz, Peter Montgomery, Ron Tipton, Dave Sherman, Bob Pennington, Les Holmes, Mimmi Eller, Jean Cashin, Dave Ritchie, Bonnie Shipe and Sam Waddle.

# HAPPY 20<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY ALDHA

## History lesson

**October 1982:** first Gathering held at Pipestem, W.Va.

**March 1983:** first organizational meeting in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., where ALDHA was formally created.

**October 1990:** first time the Gathering was at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H.

**October 1996:** first and only time so far the Gathering was in Carlisle, Pa.

**March 1998:** first time spring meeting is at Blackburn Trail Center.

View a copy of the minutes from the 1983 meeting [here](#).

## By BILL O'BRIEN

March 6, 2003

**B**IG THINGS often have small beginnings, and in ALDHA's case, it was very small indeed. On the weekend of March 5, 1983, a group of 18 people gathered at the trail hostel known as Highacre in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., and talked about the need for a new trail organization that would promote the welfare of the hiking community.

"There was a lot of high energy that weekend," Albie Pokrob recalled. "It was a lot of fun."

Albie headed to Harpers Ferry that Friday by plane, traveling in a sense from one Washington to the other. He took a break from his job at the Mount Washington Observatory in New Hampshire and flew to Washington, D.C., where he was picked up by Ron Tipton for the rest of the trip to Harpers Ferry.

Others made similar treks to arrive in time for the weekend meeting. About six months earlier, Warren Doyle had convened a group of like-minded people for the first-ever gathering of long-distance hikers. It took place in October 1982 at the Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, W.Va., and drew about 225 trail friends and friends of the trail.

It was partly a retreat, partly a conference of workshops and slide shows, partly a hoedown of

music and square dancing, and partly a weekend of renaissance, renewal and reunion for trail families spread wide and far.

In short, it was a typical Warren production.

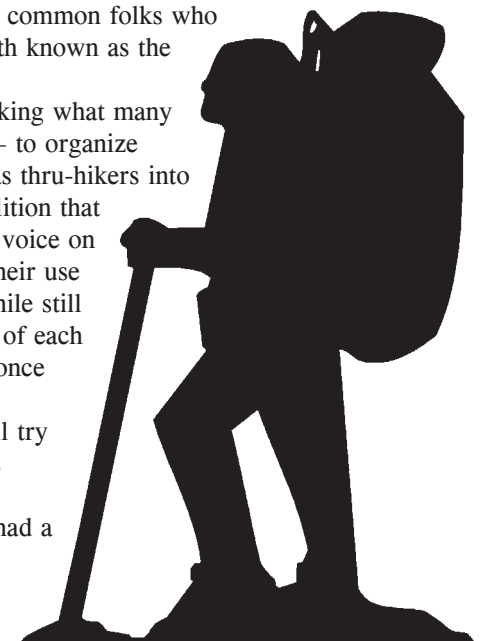
But when it was over, it left a void in the lives of its participants who didn't want it to end. Their thirst for such a group had only been temporarily sated.

Warren and others wanted to build on the energy generated by that first gathering and form a group that would not only foster fun and fellowship but also fight for the common folks who loved walking this footpath known as the Appalachian Trail.

So now Warren was asking what many thought was impossible — to organize these free spirits known as thru-hikers into a somewhat cohesive coalition that could speak out with one voice on issues directly affecting their use of long-distance trails, while still enjoying the camaraderie of each other's company at least once every year.

Well, you might as well try herding cats, Warren was repeatedly told.

But he and his friends had a



simple plan, with emphasis on the word simple: Keep this new organization small and inexpensive, keep it folk-oriented, keep it volunteer driven, and, most of all, keep it fun.

### All walks of life

The people who answered Warren's open call to attend this meeting reflected a wide swath of trail interests. There was Ed Garvey, the consummate trail club member who had already carved a permanent niche in the history of the trail through his service with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club and his influential book about his 1970 thru-hike.

There was Albie Pokrob, a three-time thru-hiker of the A.T. whose prowess with a pack on his back had become the stuff of legend among those who knew him best. He had a penchant for working in forbidding weather, eventually going from Mount Washington to the South Pole and overwintering in both places.

Bonnie Shipe, a friend of the trail, drove down with Cindy Ross, one of the most visible women hikers of the A.T. Bonnie became famous among hikers when the trail crossed in front of her house on the Cumberland Valley road walk. Her habit of serving ice cream to parched passing thru-hikers earned her the nickname "Ice Cream Lady."

Cindy Ross had hiked the trail in the late 1970s and her book about her experience led her to a path she is still following today, that of hiking and writing, now with her whole family in tow.

Sam Waddle, the epitome of the dedicated trail maintainer, drove to Harpers Ferry from his home in Tennessee. Sam was unable to speak with us for this story due to health reasons. But he had previously loaned us the photos used to illustrate this piece.

Representing the Appalachian Trail Conference were Larry Van Meter, executive director of the ATC, and Jean Cashin, the front desk meeter and greeter at ATC headquarters who had welcomed just about every hiker who ever stepped foot in Harpers Ferry during her tenure there.

Dave Ritchie, the National Park Service official who only recently passed away in North Carolina, was also on hand, representing the overall overseer of the trail project.

From the U.S. Forest Service was Dave Sherman, a soft-spoken hiker whose quiet but forceful work behind the scenes over the past two decades has arguably done more for the permanent protection of the trail than any other individual.

Forming a Connecticut contingent of sorts were Steve Markiewicz, Don Pelletier and, of course, Warren Doyle, a Connecticut native.

And there was Ron Tipton, a loquacious thru-hiker and trail advocate who, with Dave Sherman, Albie Pokrob and Ed



At the pizza place in Harpers Ferry during the first organizational meeting of ALDHA in 1983. From left, Don Pelletier, Steve Markiewicz, Albie Pokrob, Warren Doyle and Ginger Doyle.

Garvey, formed a hiking cabal known as "The Old Pros."

"We had all met such a great group of people on the trail and in the trail community, we were just trying to get more of a social thing going," Albie said. While others like Ed Garvey were looking to build a hikers' organization on the model of the Appalachian Trail Conference, Albie says he was happy just to find a way to bring together people focused on long-distance hiking and similar interests.

"It was just a great group of people who were looking for an excuse to get together."

### March 5-6, 1983

When the designated weekend arrived, the weather proved rather ominous. "It was cold and wet, I remember that," Bonnie Shipe said. It was the first weekend of March in Harpers Ferry, where cold, clammy, cloudy days can chill you to the bone.

But inside Highacre, the sense of community kept everybody warm. They went shopping for all the food they'd need and cooked community meals all weekend long. They spent time swapping stories and talking trail while hanging out on their bunks or standing around the kitchen. When they weren't in formal meetings, they were out and about in the Harpers Ferry historic district, checking out the village and other sites.

"We had a blast," Bonnie said. It was her first time in Harpers Ferry and she was thrilled to see what this mecca of the A.T. looked like.

There had been previous get-togethers of long-distance hikers, but those meetings were usually just one-shot deals. This time, they wanted to keep the reunions going while attracting new participants every year.

The first day, Saturday, was spent listening to presentations from various trail officials and discussing a variety of issues — from how to join the debate on backcountry rules and regulations affecting 2,000-milers to finding ways for hikers to help

monitor crime on the A.T.

Offering their views on these issues were people like Ruth Blackburn, who with her late husband had devoted countless hours to their beloved PATC and represented the club side of trail issues; Bob Proudman, a builder of trails, relocations and shelters who gave an overview of maintenance issues affecting trail hikers; and Mike Dawson, a regional ATC representative who spoke about volunteer opportunities for hikers.

Gail Miller of the Potomac trail club talked about rules and regulations in the Shenandoahs and announced that a new self-registration station was going to open in the national park so hikers could check themselves in more easily.

There was also some discussion — mostly from Warren — about the biennial ATC meetings and how they didn't allow for last-minute workshops or slide shows, were lacking in "fun" events, and were generally too expensive for the average hiker to attend.

(Those issues have been a recurring theme for Warren and help explain a lot of things about ALDHA's Gatherings, where program blocks are purposefully left open for "wildcat" workshops, games and contests are regularly included in the schedule, and the cost is kept almost ridiculously low. In fact, in 22 years of Gatherings, the cost has never changed; it's still just 10 bucks per head.)

### What's in a name?

Perhaps the biggest issue of the weekend cropped up on the second day, March 6. It was a debate that would forever define ALDHA — in more ways than one — and it would come to mark the actual birth of the organization.

It was the debate over what to call this new group. And like many things in ALDHA, it wasn't easy.

"We kept going around and around trying to figure out what was the best name," Albie Pokrob recalled. "First it was just

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Albie Pokrob

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**Checking in folks at the 1983 ALDHA Gathering at Concord College are Bonnie Shipe, left, and Ginger Doyle.**



the Appalachian Hikers Club, but we wanted to make it more inclusive.”

Bonnie Shipe and most of the others at the meeting didn't want to make it sound like you had to be a thru-hiker before you could join.

“The focus of this was to include as many people as possible, especially people who never did the trail so we could get them feeling confident enough to be able to do it,” she said.

The name “2,000-Miler Society” was put forward, but Warren recalled putting his foot down right away.

“I said no way!” he recalled. “We wanted so many others to feel welcome here, from all the trail angels like Bonnie and the dreamers who wanted to come and learn how to hike the trail and even the people who lived on or near the trail ... Our whole focus at first was going to have to be education and that didn't just mean people who'd already hiked the trail.”

Still, several meeting participants, including Ed Garvey, liked the idea of keeping the focus on 2,000-milers, but the debate was won by what Warren described as the younger crowd, speaking up and insisting that it be more inclusive.

“That set the tone right there,” Warren recalled. “That was the new era thru-hikers vs. The old ATC guard. That was critical. This long-distance hikers association was not going to be a 2,000-miler society. It was an association.”

By a vote of 14-4, on March 6, 1983, the group decided to christen themselves with the somewhat wordier title of “Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association.”

And so ALDHA was born.

But the emphasis on 2,000-milers lingered, and during a debate about the officers, it was agreed that the coordinator of the group must always be a “certified 2,000-miler.” Later, by a 9-8 vote, the group decreed that the three other officers — membership secretary, recording secretary and treasurer — must also be 2,000-milers.

(These restrictions were later abandoned or largely forgotten when formal bylaws were written a few years later. Today, there are no prerequisites for anyone seeking office in the group — other than membership in the organization, of course!)

### **The future looked bright**

1983 had its share of momentous events, both high and low. That January, aboard the shuttle Challenger, Sally Ride became the first American woman to travel in

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**Bonnie Shipe**  
*“The Ice Cream Lady”*

space. On Sept. 1, the Soviet Union shot down a Korean Airlines passenger jet, killing all 269 onboard. And in October, 241 Marines were killed when their barracks was destroyed by a suicide terrorist. Two days later, President Reagan ordered U.S. forces to invade the tiny island nation of Grenada to depose a communist regime.

In Harpers Ferry on that first weekend of March 20 years ago, no one seems to have had any doubt that this new group of hikers would thrive.

“I knew we had a good thing when we brought that group together,” Albie Pokrob said. “I knew how dedicated Warren and Ed were, and there was a core group of people dedicated to the trail who would keep it going.”

Bonnie Shipe, who became a legend on the trail when hikers had to pass in front of her house on the old Cumberland Valley roadwalk, says the reason for ALDHA's continuing success is that it reaches out to every trail, not just the Appalachian Trail.

“When (Warren) started throwing in other trails in workshops at the Gathering, I knew it would be going for years and years to come because it just keeps bringing in all these different people who want to learn more and more about the next trail they haven't done yet.”

While some, like Albie, expressed surprise at how quickly the idea of ALDHA caught on with other hikers, the man credited with being the founder of the group says he's not surprised in the least.

“I had no doubt it would go on,” Warren said emphatically. In fact, he said, he envisioned it would eventually branch out with chapters out West and in the central United States.

In a way, it has. Hikers on the West Coast organized themselves into their own association in the early 1990s, choosing to call themselves the American Long Distance Hikers Association. Although not affiliated with ALDHA in any way except in spirit, the group is popularly known as ALDHA West and conducts its own Gatherings, usually the weekend before ALDHA's Gathering back East.

As Warren observed, there's a universal set of values shared by every person who has spent time in the wilderness, and that makes every hiker a member of the long-distance hiking community at large, regardless of any formal affiliation with a club.

### **Still true to its mission**

It's now been 20 years since ALDHA was created. There is still no paid staff. No ownership of property. No perpetual fund-raising campaigns. And yes, no end of fun.

Annual operations run on boot-string budgets. “We're only one Gathering away from bankruptcy,” Warren is fond of saying. There have been only two increases in yearly dues, from \$3 to \$5 in the late 1980s, and then from \$5 to \$7 in 1990. Dues were increased that last time only after the membership voted to override the steering committee's recommendation of \$6 and raise it to \$7.

It hasn't changed since.

And it applies to families, not individuals, so couples and families pay only 7 bucks a year, period. Not \$7 per person.

For that, members get four newsletters a year, an annual membership directory and the services of an online home page.

Gatherings have always cost extra, but the fact is, the cost of the Gathering has never gone up! It's always been just \$10 per person. Period.

Volunteers who donate countless hours of their time have allowed ALDHA to keep costs low while providing a myriad of services and souvenirs — such as trail work trips, hostel adoptions, the annual A.T. Thru-Hikers Companion, programs at Trail Days and other trail festivals, 2,000-miler receptions at ATC Biennial Meetings, the Appalachian Trail Yearbook that commemorated thru-hiking's golden anniversary in 1998, and ongoing support of the fledgling Appalachian Trail Museum.

Has ALDHA remained close to its roots?

Yes, the founder believes, but not without a lot of effort.

“It doesn't happen by chance. It takes constant caring,” Warren Doyle said. “Little style things change, but not the substance, and you can't allow a lot of little style things to build up so they don't change the substance.”

And while Doyle laments the lower level of activism on the group's part, he also acknowledges the lack of immediate burning issues that used to keep ALDHA very vocal in the wider trail community, concerning issues such as massive trail relocations, eminent domain and instituting fees and permits.

“Freedom of movement on the trail is what I'm most concerned about today,” he said, referring to renewed calls for permits and fees.

Looking back, he said he's glad ALDHA came along when it did.

“It was the right time and the right place to do it.”