



DARWIN ON THE TRAIL

'Darwin' at the U.S.-Canada border on the Pacific Crest Trail. He'll be the keynote speaker on Saturday night at this year's Gathering in Virginia.

**2021 GATHERING**

**Southwest  
Virginia Higher  
Education Center  
in Abingdon, Va.**

**OCT. 8-11**

# 39th GATHERING **REBOOT**

Postponed by pandemic in 2020, our prime event is a go for 2021

By **VERA HURST**  
*Gathering Coordinator*

**L**ast year everything changed and we realized that missing a Gathering was something big — not leaving home, the world being turned upside down, not seeing family members — it all makes the return of this year's 39th Gathering to Abingdon, Va., even sweeter and more poignant.

When once we might have looked at this annual get-together as something that had become routine, this year the thought of seeing and hugging old trail friends and meeting new ones will be of great interest and importance.

Life is short, let's CELEBRATE!

As its name implies, The Gathering is a "gathering" of our old and new hiking friends. Its original purpose was to provide a time every year when "fellowship and renewal in the community of the Appalachian Trail" took place.

With that idea in mind at a meeting in 1983 ALDHA was established to provide dreamers, hikers of all levels, maintainers and friends of the trail a home; to provide a time for camaraderie and fellowship in an organization that focused on people who dreamed about hiking in the Appalachian mountains and beyond.

We return with great excitement to the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center for the second time on Columbus Day weekend, Oct. 8-11.

Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains amid the rolling Virginia Highlands, this quiet-seeming town provides a home for great music, good food and friendly people.

If you drive from the North on Interstate 81, you will have long-running views of the Shenandoahs. Traveling from the South, you will see the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests. All these beautiful areas are home to the Appalachian Trail.

**The best way to help us organize this Gathering is to sign up early, at [www.aldha.org](http://www.aldha.org)**

## ALDHA will honor end-to-end hikers at the Gathering

Thru-hikers, section-hikers, flip-flop-pers and anyone else who has pieced together the entire A.T. during the past year will be recognized as usual at this year's Gathering. Those who have completed the trail and plan on attending the Gathering should contact Coordinator Ken Bunning in advance to let him know your full name and address, your trail name (if any), and your start and finish dates.

You can email your information to [coordinator@aldha.org](mailto:coordinator@aldha.org).

As in past years, we'll call you up on stage on Friday night to present you with a certificate congratulating you on your achievement on behalf of your peers. The certificate includes a patch declaring you hiked the A.T. all the way.

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# GATHERING: More room to camp this year

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There is no better place for our get-together. The campus provides a one-stop place for camping, meeting and — this year — eating most meals. A level and expanded camping area brings smiles to our faces, and the similarly level parking lot will provide a great place for our van-dwelling nomadic Gatherlings to park for the weekend. Tents and RVs are welcome.

We will even be highlighting our traveling members by providing a show-and-tell time slot during the workshops. Also, if you have dreamed about what you will do after hiking, come check out some of our rigs during a 3-part session on post-hike depression and how some have handled it.

We have an exciting line-up for our evening programs, which will be held in the main hall. We will start Friday night with our usual festivities: roll call and the recognition of class years, including newly minted A.T. end-to-enders who will receive “I Hiked ALDHA Way” patches and certificates, and the enthusiastic applause of their long-distance hiker predecessors and peers.

## BIG CROWD ANTICIPATED

We expect many attendees at this year’s Gathering due to our Saturday and Sunday evening speakers’ credentials. Darwin, from the YouTube channel “Darwin on the Trail,” will be our Saturday night keynote speaker. He is an experienced hiker who has hiked the PCT, Pinhoti and Arizona trails. He has section-hiked the A.T. and had planned a thru-hike last year but due to the pandemic he got off trail and hiked the Colorado Trail instead.

His video, “Through the Great Southwest,” which he filmed in 2019, is a documentary about the Arizona Trail. The proceeds from the film are shared with the Arizona Trail Association to support that trail.

His YouTube channel has a community with more than 300,000 followers interested in hiking and gear. He frequently provides high-quality videos including his current project, a compelling documentary concerning our public lands and their use, which he will share Saturday night. We hope it will spark great conversation among all of us and provide us with new ideas of how we can continue to support our lands in meaningful ways.

Our own Cindy Ross will return on Sunday night as our featured speaker. She will talk about her new book, “Walking Toward Peace: Veterans Healing on America’s Trails.” Words from the back cover of her book speak to why we all hike: “Drawing on current research and perspectives of professional therapists, Ross provides scientific data to explain how time in nature affects the brain...” Using veterans’ stories she

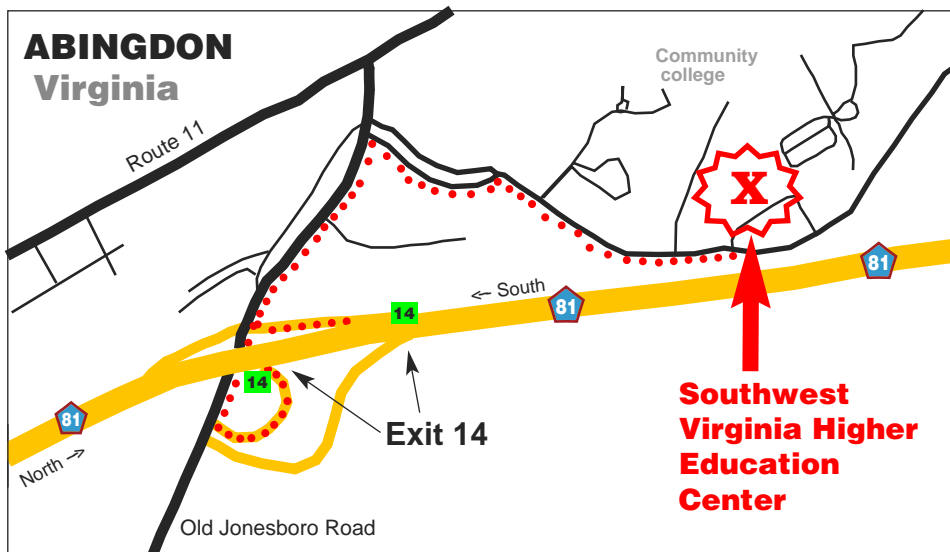


SWVHEC

**DIRECTIONS: From the North:** take Interstate 81 South to Exit 14 in Abingdon, Va.

**From the South:** take Interstate 81 North to Exit 14 in Abingdon, Va.

Turn **RIGHT** onto Old Jonesboro Road and take your **second RIGHT** onto Community College Drive. Head into the parking lot for the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center and register inside.



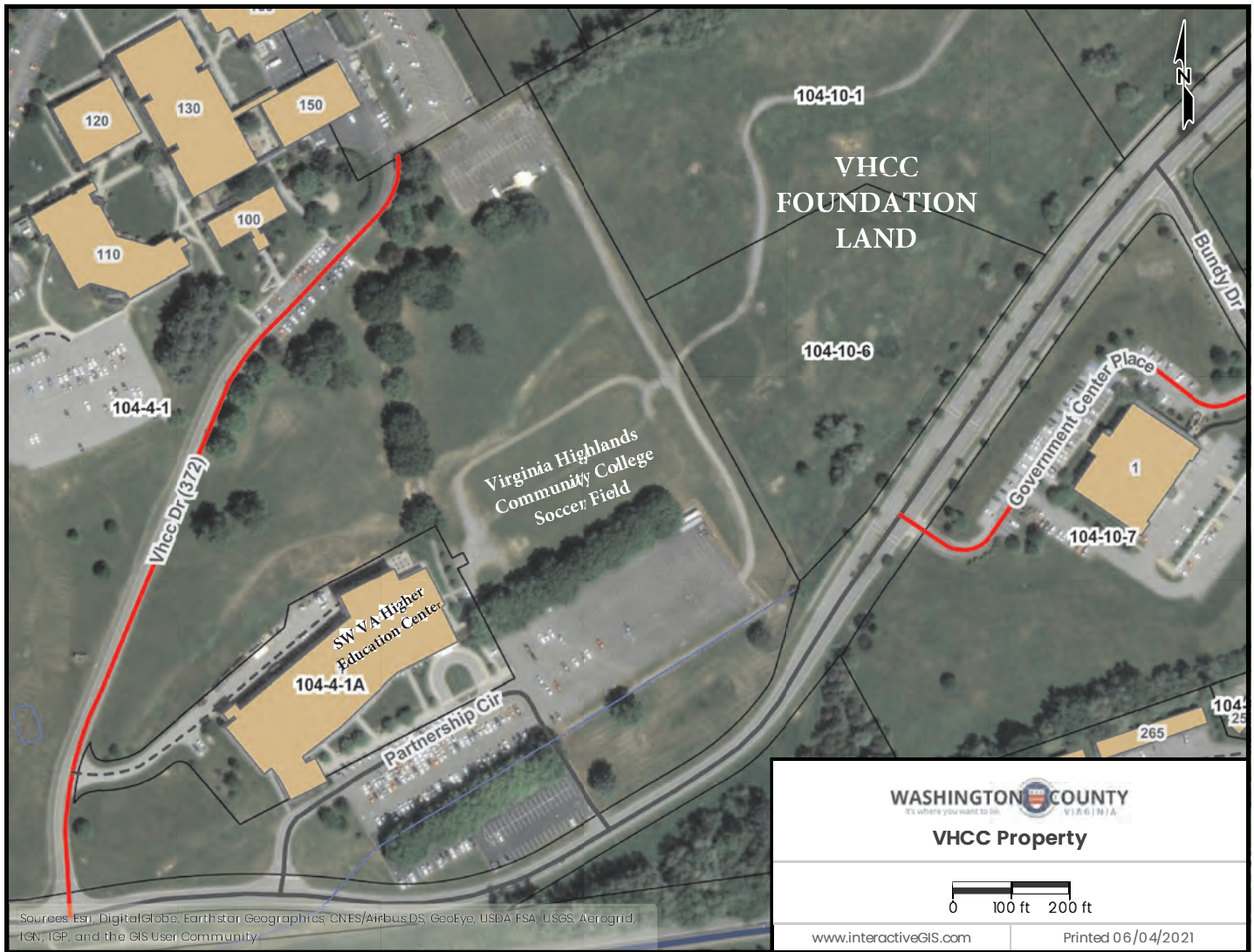
addresses what many of us experience and call “post-hike depression,” making the case that we should all spend more time outside to enhance our mental health. Her talk will not only be telling others’ tales of healing on the A.T. but speaking to your common connection.

We are all excited about new workshops while, also, looking forward to those that happen every year. Bring on your new ideas ... it is not too late to sign up to present a workshop. One new workshop will be a 3-part workshop series on post-hike depression. This will include a personal look at how it affects hikers, a panel discussion and then a look at how some have learned to live in a less-is-more environment full-time while engaging their adventurous spirit.

Sunday will feature our annual membership meeting where, for the first time, we will not be voting for a new board but will hear the announcement of who won the digital election that is now underway. Please consider throwing your name into the hat for one of our eight open positions. (See related story on Page 1.)

Monday will finish up the Gathering fun with the usual trail maintenance outing. We will partner with Mount Rogers A.T. Club to do some good work on trail. We are not sure what they have in mind for us to work on yet but it will be a good time with the resulting benefits to the trail.

The following includes a rundown of what to look forward to.



**A NOTE ABOUT THE ABOVE MAP:** The Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center is the large building at lower left. That’s where all meetings, workshops and catered meals will be happening. The large parking lot to the right of that building is where you’ll park for the weekend. The soccer field above that is for quiet camping only: No cooking fires,

campfires or alcohol are allowed. The VHCC Foundation Land across the road to the right of the soccer field is where the campfire will be located, and people are welcome to tent there. We aim to have a couple of port-a-johns positioned near that field. No parking is allowed on either field, so please carry your gear to and from your tentsite.

**GATHERING ODDS AND ENDS**

The 2021 Gathering celebration will once again be held at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center in Abingdon, Va. Please join us for our 39th Gathering, set for Columbus Day weekend, Oct. 8–11.

**AFTERNOON DELIGHT**

We realize that things are crazy when you first arrive at the campsite on Friday afternoon for registration. So, this year ALDHA will bring back our wildly successful “Afternoon Delight” welcoming cookout. From 3:30-5:30 p.m. we will provide hot dogs and a few snacks for your enjoyment.

Feel free to bring a salad or some chips to compliment what we will have. Look for directions on campus as to its exact location.

**REGISTRATION DESK**

The fee for the Gathering has not gone up. It still is just \$20 to attend the Gathering. Sign up in advance online at [aldha.org/join.html](http://aldha.org/join.html) to be entered in the Early Bird Raffle for a chance to win some great raffle prizes and gear or register in person when you arrive. All the forms you need are on the web page: the Gathering registration form, the workshop presenter form, and the hiker fair exhibitor form.

Registration will be open throughout the weekend. The Gathering Registration desk will be conveniently located in the middle of the front hallway starting Friday at noon and go until 5 p.m. It will then reopen from 6-7 prior to the evening session, and open again from approximately 9-10 p.m. after the program. (In other words, one hour before/after the program).

On Saturday, the registration desk will be open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**FRIDAY NIGHT OPENING**

Our evening starts with our customary roll call. Bill O’Brien did such a great job last year; he will return as our class caller. We will start with the Class of 2019 and go back in time to the last person standing. A special award will be presented to the thru-hiker(s) from the earliest class. Who will it be? We never know.

Also, our yearly Billy Goat Award will be presented on Friday night to people who have accumulated tens of thousands of miles on the trail.

Finally, we will call for the members of the Classes of 2020, then 2021, and SOBOS from 2019 to come to the stage to receive their



<sup>CROOKED STICKS</sup> H. DEAN CLARK

At right, Sue Williams, aka 'Leapfrog,' conducts a workshop for hikers over age 50 at the 2017 Gathering in Abingdon, Va.

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"I hiked ALDHA Way" certificates and patches. Please let us know ahead of the Gathering if you are finished or are finishing a thru-hike so that we can have your certificate ready.

#### CAMPSITE & PRIVIES

If you attended the first Abingdon Gathering in 2017 then you will remember that camping is directly adjacent to the Education Center building. It is in a large, flat, open field with plenty of room for any sized tent. This year we are adding some additional real estate to the north. The Virginia Highlands Foundation is generously letting us use their land for camping and our evening fires (if there's no fire ban in place). If you are an RV- or van-dweller, the large, flat parking lot directly opposite the camping area is the perfect spot for setting up your rig.

The bathrooms, which are brought in by the city, will be directly down the small hill from the camping area and available all weekend. They are not ADA compliant but there are restrooms in the Education Center which will be available during the day. Doors to the center will be locked after 10 p.m.

#### CAMPFIRES

Unlike 2017, this year we will not have to leave the area to have our campfires, provided that the commonwealth of Virginia does not have a fire ban. The Virginia Highlands Community College Educational Foundation will provide extra space that we'll use for camping and campfires. It is located at the north end of the soccer field. They have less restrictions than Virginia Highlands Community College and allow both fires and reasonable alcohol consumption.

#### HOTELS

The town of Abingdon has several hotels to choose from if you do not care to camp or stay in an RV. We are partnering with the Clarion Pointe Hotel (named the Comfort Inn in 2017) just up the road from the Education Center.

## CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO BRING:

- **Photos, videos** for the Earl Shaffer Photo Contest. (Details on Page 9.)
- **Apples** for the Apple Contest. These can be dropped off at the registration table at ALDHA Central. (See Page 9.)
- **Coffee cup** for free coffee at ALDHA Central. (Styrofoam is bad for the Earth; besides, ALDHA has a policy against buying styrofoam or other cups.)
- **Tent:** Don't laugh, folks have driven hundreds of miles to a Gathering and left their tent poles at home. Remember your rain fly, ground tarp, pegs and poles. Oh, and you'll need a tent, too.
- **Photos** of trail friends who've hiked on during the past year or so, and we'll add them to our Memorial Wall.
- **Work gloves**, long pants & other gear if you plan to join a Monday work trip.
- **Nametag** from a previous Gathering, in case you want to recycle your old one and save ALDHA money on a new one.
- **Some spending money:** the ALDHA Store will be fully set up, as will other trail-related vendors. Hiking authors will also have books to sell and sign for you at the Hiker Fair. There is also a raffle or two likely going on all weekend.
- **Food** in case you wish to cook in the Foundation Field. Note: There is no cooking allowed on the soccer field; camp on the Foundation Field instead.
- **Earplugs:** A vital piece of gear for any night alongside fellow hikers, and I-81.

They have not only matched the rates of the lower-end hotels nearby but will be a mostly remodeled hotel. A business center has been added to their remodeled front desk and expanded breakfast area. Their rooms will have new mattresses and remodeled bathrooms. Fresh linens will grace their new beds. We are keeping fingers crossed that all the rooms will be renovated by the time we arrive.

A block of rooms will be reserved for us and you may reserve as of now. When booking a room, mention that you are with ALDHA and let them know if you have any special needs. Their rates are \$55 on weekdays and \$65 on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

If all the rooms in the current block are reserved we have the option to add more but it would be good to book early. The hotel is pet friendly. Contact information: 170 Jonesboro Road, Abingdon, Va. 24210, 276-676-2222.

#### DINING & MEAL TICKETS

Unlike other Gathering sites, the Southwest VA Higher Education Center does not have a kitchen nor serve meals. This year we will provide catered meals for Saturday and Sunday breakfast and lunch. For dinner on Saturday and Sunday, please take advantage of the fine dining establishments available in Abingdon. Meal tickets will cost a total of \$50 for the four meals and will need to be purchased in advance, as there will be no cash sales for meals and no refunds after Sept. 30. Breakfast is \$10, lunch \$15. Buy tickets at <https://aldha.org/gathering/meals> (see menu in link).

There are plenty of dining options in Abingdon but if you choose to leave during the workshops, you will take a meandering drive around town to get to anything but McDonalds. Be advised that it is the busy season in that area and restaurants may be crowded on the weekend.

## HIKER FAIR

We have a very, large vendor area at the Education Center, we hope that you will consider setting up a table this year. In the past, our space has been tight ..NOT this year. In this area you will find the ALDHA store, lost and found, the A.T. Museum exhibit, exhibits from various trail clubs, vendors, and authors, the photo contest, and the apple contest. Vendors and exhibitors should register online using the form in the left-hand column to set up a table at the fair.

## RAFFLE

We will be conducting a raffle throughout the weekend. Tickets will be available as follows: 1 for \$1, 14 for \$10, 6 for \$5, 22 for \$15, 30 for \$20. At the Saturday evening program we will draw the winning tickets and give out prizes to the winners. There usually is some pretty good stuff given away. All proceeds will go to help defray Gathering costs, then to a trail project if there are excess funds. This will be a fun way to help support the Gathering and other ALDHA projects.

## APPLE CONTEST

This is always a popular part of the Gathering, start keeping your eye out for your finest fruits right now. You might have a prize-winning apple at this moment in your own back yard or at your neighborhood apple stand. It does not matter where it comes from, we even have had entries from outside of the U.S. You may turn them in when you register, or to ALDHA Central on Saturday morning. Please provide your name, contact info, and the state the apples came from. Judging will be Saturday afternoon and the winners will be announced at the Saturday evening program. Prizes will go to the largest one, the smallest one, the tastiest one, the most colorful one, and the best overall

## PHOTO & VIDEO CONTEST

The Earl Shaffer Memorial Photo Contest is now accepting digital photo submissions! To enter, complete the Photo Contest Form and upload your image or video from your phone or computer. Printed images should be submitted as digital files.

You may enter up to 5 separate submissions. Entries must be received by September 30, 2021. Photos will be shared on the ALDHA website, where the general public can vote on their favorites.

Prizes will be awarded in five categories:

1. Trail beauty and grandeur.
2. Trail wildlife or flora.
3. Trail Humor.
4. Trail community (including hikers, maintainers, trail angels, hostel staff, etc.)

## SHOWERS

Showers will be available during the weekend at the Harry L. Coombs Recreational Center, 300 Stanley St., Abingdon, when it is open from



## Saturday's speaker

"Darwin" will talk about the need to protect public lands during Saturday night's main program at the Gathering. You can catch up on the long-distance hiker's thoughts and observations on his YouTube channel, "Darwin on the Trail."

At the end of 2014, he and his wife quit their jobs, sold 95% of the things they owned and left their hometown "in search of adventure, inspiration and the true meaning of happiness," he explains on his website, [darwinonthehill.com](http://darwinonthehill.com).

He has hiked the Appalachian Trail, PCT, Pinhoti Trail, Colorado Trail and Arizona Trail. He shares gear lists and offers other tips to fellow hikers and those aspiring to become hikers. He also reviews gear on his site.

He has bikepacked a section of the Arizona Trail and did a bicycle tour of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

His film on protecting public lands will be shown at the Gathering on Saturday.

Friday through Monday. Hours will be posted at ALDHA Central and in the Gathering program. The fee for showers is \$2. Please bring cash.

## DAY HIKES & CREEPER TRAIL

There are many day hiking and biking possibilities available to you, both before and after the Gathering. The 34-mile Creeper Trail originates in Abingdon and runs all the way to White Top Station. Bikes are available for rental in Abingdon and a ride from Abingdon to Damascus and back is a nice afternoon adventure.

The Appalachian Trail runs through downtown Damascus, a short 20 miles away, and Backbone Rock Recreation area is a short drive outside of Damascus. Grayson Highlands is also a day-hikers paradise.

For more interesting things to do both before and after the Gathering, check out the links listed on Page 10.



## Sunday's speaker

Cindy Ross, one of ALDHA's founding members, will be the Sunday night Gathering speaker on Oct. 10. She spent the past year writing two books and will be speaking on one of them, "Walking Toward Peace — Veterans Healing on America's Trails." It details the positive effects of spending time in nature for "ecotherapy."

This healing technique is becoming a leading way to help veterans and others wrestling with post-traumatic stress disorder and the effects of life's trauma. The stories she will share from her book will encourage all who have encountered post-hike feelings of depression. Many of us have benefited from the peace and comfort that nature brings, and her stories of veterans' healing will not only resonate but inspire us.

Ross hiked the A.T. from 1979-80 and has since trekked across the PCT and CDT, doing the CDT in sections with her family, including two young children.

## ELECTIONS

We have eight spots open on the ALDHA board this year and we would love to have new individuals fill some of these. In the last several years we've had individuals step forward who have never held a board position before. There have been some challenges presented to us but we have also done some great new things, like start an Instagram account, provide an email bulletin board and launch a new outreach education program dubbed HASTE. New people bring new ideas and direction — we are excited about the possibilities. Other positions are also available: organizing trail work, providing care packages to low-cost hostels, managing the ALDHA store, writing for the award-winning newsletter, or becoming a volunteer HASTE educator. If you have some time, please consider volunteering.

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## HIKER FAIR RESERVATION FORM ~ 2021 ALDHA GATHERING

❖ ❖ ❖ Form must be received by SEPT. 30, 2021 ❖ ❖ ❖

Become a part of the Gathering and reserve a table or two at the Hiker Fair. Space is limited, and the deadline for reserving a table is Sept. 30. Tables are 30" x 72". Depending on turnout, tables for authors may have to be shared. Outdoor display space may be available upon request. Participation in the Hiker Fair is \$20 per person which includes the Friday night reception, all presentations and workshops, camping and showers.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_ City, State, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Company, Trail Organization, Book or Video \_\_\_\_\_

URL: \_\_\_\_\_ Type of Vendor: Trail Advocacy  Gear  Author  Other

Type of table: Indoors  Outdoors  Number of tables: One  Two  Three  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Special requests (We'll do our best) \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to donate an item to the raffle at the Gathering? If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_

**ONLINE VERSION: <https://bit.ly/3ddFlxH>**



H. DEAN CLARK

## WORKSHOP PRESENTER'S FORM ~ 2021 ALDHA GATHERING

❖ ❖ ❖ Deadline for submission: SEPT. 1, 2021 ❖ ❖ ❖

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_ City, State, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Presentation \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate Length \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Presentation (workshop, slide show, panel discussion, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe how your presentation should be explained in the program: \_\_\_\_\_

What, if any, is desired day and time of presentation? (i.e., Saturday afternoon, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Please snail-mail this form **no later than Sept. 1, 2020**, to: ALDHA, 10 Benning St., PMB 224, West Lebanon, NH 03784

Or, click the following link to fill out the form online and send it in electronically. You have until Sept. 15 if you file the form online.

**ONLINE VERSION: <https://bit.ly/39eUdz4>**



‘CROOKED STICKS’ H. DEAN CLARK

‘Peaches’ checks out a hammock at the tentsite of the 2017 Gathering in Abingdon, Va.

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Nominations are now being taken, and elections will be held via email starting the first of September. Members in good standing will receive an email ballot just like last year. Please contact our coordinator, Ken Bunning, for more information. (Again, see Page 1 for full story.)

We encourage all Gathering attendees to join us for the Sunday morning general meeting. It’s a great way to meet our new board and to learn more about ALDHA. Results of the online election will be provided at this meeting.

### WORK TRIPS

We will offer a trail maintenance trip with the Mount Rogers AT Club. At this time, trail work is still limited because of COVID, so there should be lots of opportunities to work, from brush cutting to heavy lifting. MRATC does not know exactly what they will plan but we know they will be greatly appreciative of any ALDHA members who can stay Monday to work. Lunch will be provided. Bob Huff, who took over as ALDHA’s boundary work trip organizer, will be working with MRATC to plan this event

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

We always love and appreciate our volunteers. We would love to have any and all who so desire to come and hang out early with us and assist with set-up on Thursday. We have some work to do on the tentsites, Hiker Fair, our big tents and ALDHA Central (where registration, lost &

found and other services are located). We have administrative things to do like placing workshop signs on classroom doors and stuffing registration envelopes. There are many fine moving parts which all happen at the same time.

Please email me, Vera Hurst, at [gathering@aldha.org](mailto:gathering@aldha.org) if interested in arriving early. If you cannot come early, then plan on staying afterward to help take everything down. Helping gives everyone an opportunity to be involved even in a small way with ALDHA, but also, you’ll get to know some new friends.

One of the biggest and easiest ways you can help us out is by pre-registering. Do it NOW at <https://aldha.org/event-4017672/Registration>.

### WORKSHOPS

ALDHA has never had a shortage of workshops at a Gathering, and hopefully, this year will be no exception. We normally have a variety of workshops on basic backpacking skills as well as the beauty of the flora and fauna on the trail, international trails and skills enhancement. Our fellow ALDHA members are always generous and want to share their adventures from around the globe. We hope that will be true this year.

Due to the pandemic, it has been hard for some of us to get out and hike or travel. If you have presented in the past and want to do a workshop again, **register**. Never presented before but have a great idea for a workshop? GREAT ... **register**. If you are planning a trip on an exciting new trail, we want to hear about it

... **Register**. If you have experience hiking one or all of the National Scenic Trails (such as the A.T., PCT or CDT), or on the Camino de Santiago, or are a hostel owner, and you want to join as a panelist to talk about one of the above, **REGISTER**. Are you an ultralight backpacker, a compass and map wiz, a Leave No Trace trainer or a wonderful photographer? **PLEASE REGISTER** to be a workshop presenter at this year’s Gathering.

Several panel discussions could be planned for special interest hiking groups: hostel management, trail maintenance and boundary work, women on the trail, hikers over 50...but we need panel members and moderators. Please contact Vera Hurst at [gathering@aldha.org](mailto:gathering@aldha.org).

Sign up to present your own workshop at <https://form.jotformpro.com/form/21774749676976>.

If you have any questions, please email me.

### ADDITIONAL INFO

■ **Pets** — Service animals will be allowed at all events. Dogs must be on a leash at all times, and any gifts dropped on the ground must be cleaned up immediately. The Clarion Pointe hotel is pet friendly.

■ **ADA accessibility** — The facility is ADA accessible, however, the restrooms in the camping area are not. The education center’s restrooms will be open while programs are going on but will close at 10 p.m. when the building will be locked. The building will reopen between 6:30 and 7 a.m.

■ **Charging stations** — This first-class, modern facility has numerous charging stations where you can charge your cell phone, tablet, etc. Bring your own cord and charger.

■ **Alcohol** — Not allowed on campus, parking lots or soccer field camping area. However, on the Foundation property, reasonable alcohol consumption and a bonfire will be allowed. Quiet hours as usual will begin at 1 a.m. on the Foundation field, earlier on the soccer field.

■ **Respect** — This probably does not need to be mentioned but please be respectful of our hosts at the facility, the townspeople and your fellow Gathering attendees. Also, a thank you to our workshop presenters, board members, and event volunteers would be appreciated. Many of our presenters have been waiting a year for this year’s Gathering and all the major players from the city, school, hotel and restaurants have been incredibly challenged during the past year but are excited that we are coming.

■ **Annual meeting** — We encourage all Gathering attendees to join us for the Sunday morning annual members’ meeting. This is a great way to see who the leaders of our organization are and to learn more about ALDHA. It’s rewarding to be more involved in this great organization, so come and see how you can serve.

■ **Group photo** — The group photo will be taken immediately after the annual member’s meeting.