

Take a hike!

Holly Springs Man Hikes Appalachian Trail

BY NANCY YOUNG
EDITOR

On May 30, Charlie Keefer, 61, of Holly Springs, went for a walk. November 10, 2,174 miles later, he was ready to come back home again.

Keefer hiked the entire length of the Appalachian Trail from Katahdin, Maine, to Springer Mountain, Georgia. Along the way, he wore through 2-1/2 pairs of boots and lost a little over 30 pounds, but he gained more than he lost—he gained perspective.

When Keefer announced his plan, his friends and family had mixed reactions. He recalled his brother Karl's words: "When I said 'Take a hike,' I didn't mean it literally!" But Charlie, who had recently retired from BASF, was in search of purpose. His friend Mack Spainhour, who was retiring around the same time, had long dreamed of hiking the trail and invited Keefer along. Keefer loves the outdoors, but previously had only attempted day hikes—never a trek of this magnitude.

He trained by jogging and exercising, especially to strengthen leg muscles. Then he and Spainhour started the trail at its most challenging point.

The Appalachian Trail Conference warns that Maine and New Hampshire are the most strenuous parts of the trail. "They were right," said Keefer.

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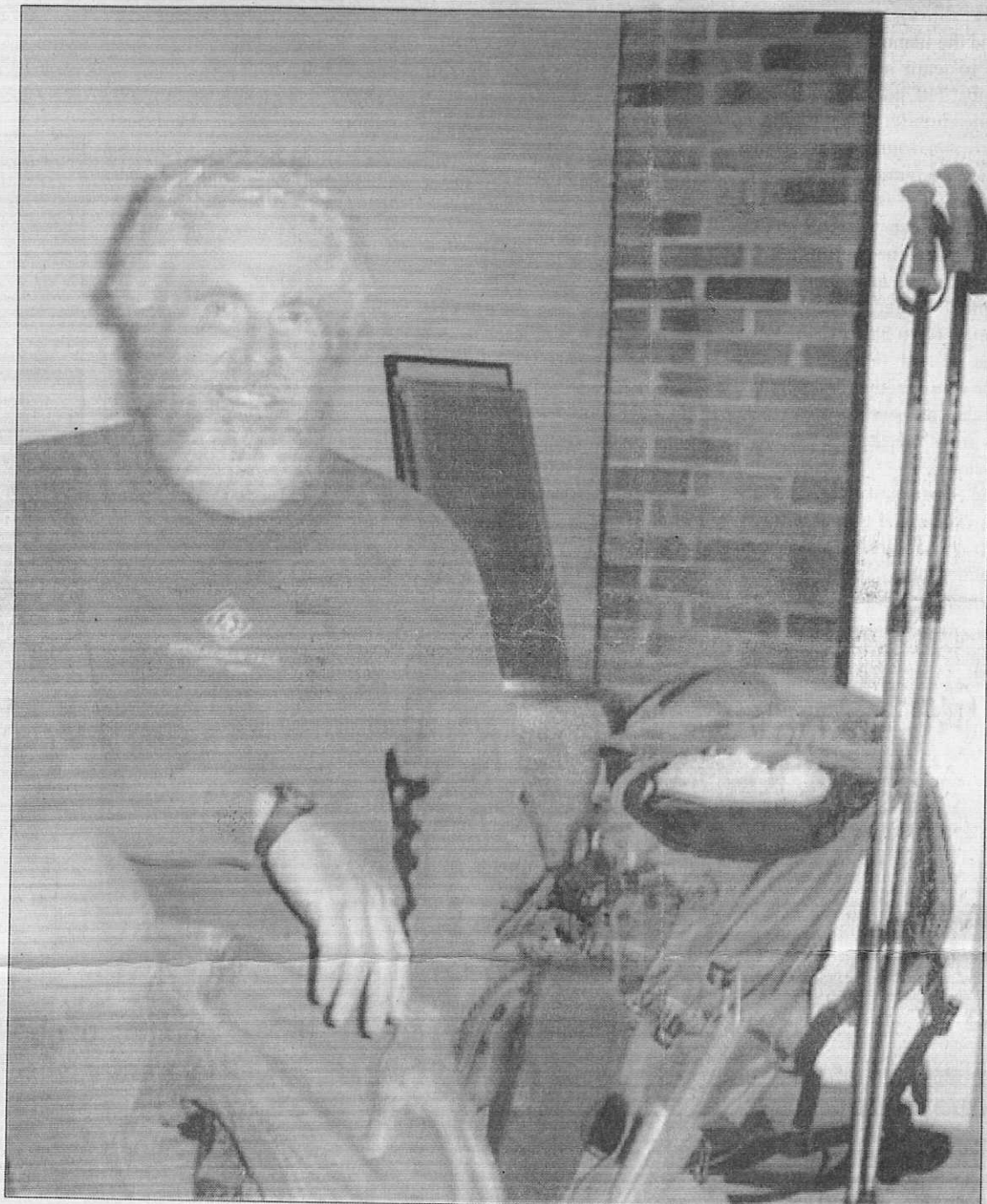


PHOTO BY NANCY YOUNG

Charlie Keefer poses with his hiking gear. Keefer recently hiked the entire length of the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia.

Hike

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"If you have any weakness, it'll show up there." Scaling Katahdin isn't a hike; it's a quest. May 30 is about as early as a hiker can attempt the climb because of icy hazards.

Katahdin is brutal. As the hikers climbed, the air grew colder and colder. After scaling two rock faces that tested their mettle, they reached a frozen table land buffeted by 50-60 mph winds, forcing them to don ski jackets and gloves. The descent was hard on straining muscles. And at one point, a moose walked out of the woods no more than 30 feet from Keefer.

Maine took its toll. Keefer strained muscles in his lower leg and developed shin splints, while Spainhour hurt his knee and had to drop out of the trail.

Keefer continued solo.

According to the ATC, 15 percent quit the first week. Only 20 percent of hikers who begin the Appalachian Trail make it the whole way. Since 1936, 8,082 completers have joined the "2,000 mile club." Charlie Keefer wanted to be one of them.

He adopted the trail name

"Charlie the Tuna"—and not just because tuna was a staple of his meager diet. He recalled an old Starkist® commercial with the tag line, "Maybe next year, Charlie." Keefer was determined that this would be the year for him.

One neighbor said that he thought Charlie wouldn't make it 500 miles. Charlie would prove him wrong.

Keefer averaged about 10 miles a day in Maine and New Hampshire, but by the time he reached the hills of Pennsylvania and the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, he was doing 15-plus. Some days he covered as many as 25 miles, motivated by the siren call of the trail's end.

Along the way, he had plenty of time to reflect on how he wanted to spend his retirement. Back home, his wife of 38 years, Mary Ann, kept up his morale. "I would never hold him back," she explained. She met up with him at multiple points along the trail—even taking him to a wedding in New Jersey. "He did 2,000-some miles," she laughed. "I did 10,000 on the car."

They kept in touch by cell phone, and a Web site kept family and friends informed of Keefer's progress.

Keefer acknowledged that one truth he learned on his hike was that he'd taken Mary Ann for granted. "I've got to make her more a part of everything I do," he said. As he walked mile after mile, one song he had loaded in his MP3 reminded him of Mary Ann. It was Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings." That's what Mary Ann was to him, Keefer explained.

He'd listen to Ragtime when he needed to increase his speed, and he had John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" and the Stones' "Satisfaction" to call on as the mood suited him.

He emerged from the trail with a heightened sense of giving. Along the way, he encountered many instances of generosity—often involving food. Food in meager on the trail, and hunger's a constant companion. Extravagant feasts and surprise gifts of ice cream sundaes glow in Keefer's memory, and his eyes still light up as he describes sumptuous spreads including hot fudge.

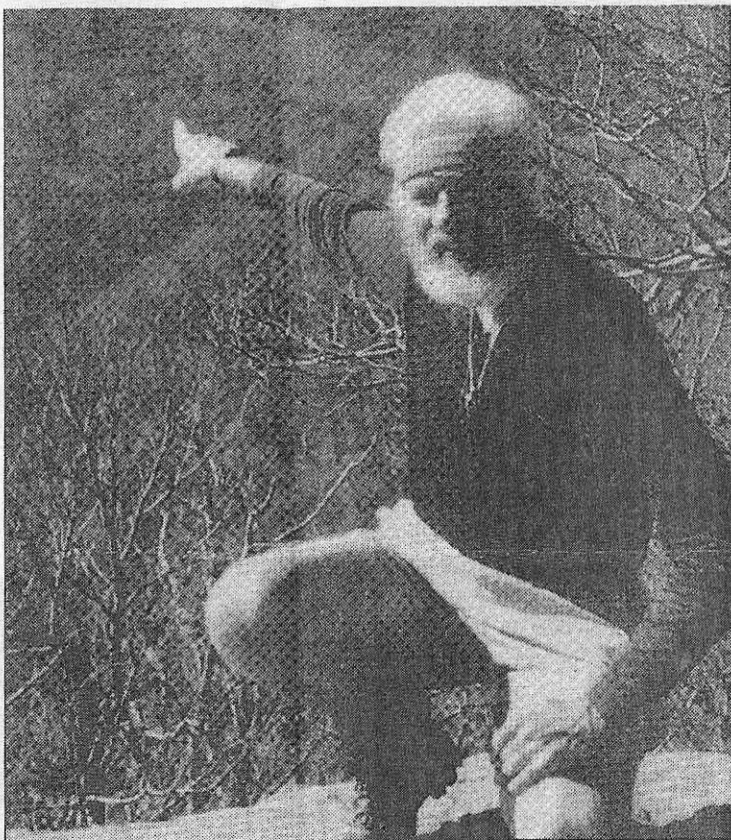
Keefer kept a bag full of artifacts that remind him of what others did to help him along the trail. He hopes to return the kindnesses.

Hikers carefully weigh the importance of everything they carry. Essential gear, like pack, hiking poles, first aid kit and maps, are heavy enough. But Keefer chose to pack some treasures along with the gear. One was a version of "Happy Trails" that had been composed for his retirement. The first verse reads, "Your trail's a happy one/Ours will be blue/While you hike the Appalachian route/Our hearts you'll carry 'long with you."

Other treasures Charlie toted were pictures of his wife, daughter and deceased son.

At the end of the trail, Mary Ann and daughter Kathy joined him, and together they climbed Springer Mountain.

There were parties afterwards. Keefer's glad to be back home, but he admits he has some trouble adjusting to the soft life. He's still irresistibly drawn to the fully-stocked refrigerator, and he stays under the hot shower for up to half an hour.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Charlie Keefer perches on Blood Mountain in Georgia, pointing to his goal and the trail's end: Springer Mountain. After 2,174 grueling miles, he reached it November 10.

The trail still calls him, and he plans to return. A final treasure he carried with him was an old Irish blessing that helped sustain

him on his long trek there and back again: "May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back."