

Art Carey

Take a hike!

It's a good way to get or stay fit. And in Southeastern Pennsylvania, you can hit a rugged section of the famed Appalachian Trail.

My two goals in life are to find my grandfather's Jeep (a 1946 Willys CJ-2A with a column shift) and to build a replica of Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin in the Maine woods.

Other than that, my ambitions are simple:

1. To benchpress 300 pounds.
2. To bike across the United States.
3. To walk the Appalachian Trail.



So when Ted Glackman called the other day and suggested we hike a piece of the trail in Pennsylvania, I jumped at the chance.

As most of you know, the Appalachian Trail, or AT, is a 2,160-mile highway for hikers that runs from Georgia to Maine. We who live in or around Philadelphia are lucky, because the trail arcs around the southeastern part of the state. That means it's possible to access the trail at numerous points from west of Harrisburg to north of Easton in a couple of hours or less.

Why bother? Well, besides exercising the body, hiking the AT soothes the soul. In the words of Benton MacKaye, the architect who conceived the trail in the 1920s, it's an experience that offers escape from "the humdrum of the regulation world."

Ted Glackman is 47, lives in Ardmore, and has been hiking for the last dozen years. He got hooked on it after a few outings with his boy. Jake was a preteen at the time, and both father and son found hiking to be a terrific adventure in bonding. Ted kept at it, and twice a year he plans a multi-day hiking and camping trip for his union-resistant, nature-loving buds.

Ted is a member of the Appalachian Trail Conference and the Appalachian Mountain Club, whose Delaware Valley chapter sponsors a full calendar of hikes in the region (Web address: www.amcdv.org). He has walked all but 18 miles of the 230-mile portion of the AT in Pennsylvania. Some sections he has hiked several times, and he

knows the most spectacular vistas. He also is well acquainted with AT lore and some of the characters (such as the lunatic near Harrisburg who invades the tents of thru-hikers and shouts, "You'll never make it!")

The Russian Princess, my sturdy mate, was delighted that Glackman would be my guide. "He has common sense," she said. Translation: He would discourage me from doing "something stupid" (and manly), such as a handstand on the edge of a cliff.

She also was happy because Glackman is a licensed psychologist (he runs the Joseph J. Peters Institute in Center City, a nonprofit psychiatric outpatient clinic for sexual abuse issues). She seems to think I would benefit from associating with a mental-health professional, someone I can talk to about my "issues," specifically my ongoing infatuation with Jeeps, babes and Spam.

The part of the trail Glackman picked is a short stretch along the Berks and Schuylkill County line, near the town of Hamburg. But first he wanted to make sure we were well provisioned. So we stopped at the Allentown Farmers Market. Glackman may be sensible, but he's also mean, and practically a vegetarian. When I got excited about the beautifully displayed ground beef, he called it "carrion." He wouldn't let me order a turkey sandwich because he said the mayonnaise would spoil in the heat. I had to settle for a healthy meatball grinder smothered in tomato sauce and American cheese, which safety-obsessed Ted insisted that I pack in *ice*.

After a jaunt up a gravel access road, we began our hike at a place called Windsor Furnace, the site of an old iron furnace. Our plan was to hike about four miles to a scenic overlook called the Pinnacle and then hike back. Total distance: eight miles and change.

"That seems like a mighty short hike," I told Ted. "I can run that distance in less than an hour."

"But not on this type of terrain," Ted said. "It's very rocky." Average hiking speed on the AT is one to two miles an hour, and most thru-hikers cover only 12 to 15 miles a day.

For the first few hundred yards, the trail was easy and pleasant. But as it began to ascend more steeply, it also became rockier. By the time we reached the ridge of Blue Mountain, it was like hopscotching across a jetty.

No wonder humorist Bill Bryson skipped the Pennsy part of the AT. In his book *A Walk in the Woods*, he writes: "I never met a hiker with a good word to say about the trail in Pennsylvania. It is, as someone told a National Geographic reporter in 1987, the place 'where boots go to die.' During the last ice age, it experienced what geologists call a periglacial climate - a zone at the edge of an ice sheet characterized by frequent freeze-thaw cycles that fractured the rock. The result is mile upon mile of jagged, oddly angled slabs of stone strewn about in wobbly piles known to scientists as

felsenmeer (literally, 'sea of rocks') . . . Lots of people leave Pennsylvania limping and bruised."

Truth is, I was already limping, thanks to a severe case of plantar fasciitis (heel spur). Each time I planted my left foot, it felt as if I were stepping on a hot spike, and the rugged terrain didn't help. In my 20s, I used to *run* a 15-mile section of the AT during a 50-mile race in Maryland. I skipped and scampered over rocks and roots with agile abandon. Thirty years later, my bearings and shock absorbers are shot.

But no way was I going to let a little pain slow me down. Especially after Ted told me about folks completing the AT in their 70s, and the successful thru-hiker who was *blind!*

The AT ain't for pantywaists, and not just in Pennsylvania (I won't even talk about the bugs, bears and rattlesnakes). Thru-hikers scale at least 250 mountains - the equivalent of climbing from sea level to the top of Mount Everest 16 times! But that's part of the fun. Earlier, Ted had given me a copy of the May issue of AMC Outdoors, the magazine of the Appalachian Mountain Club. The cover story celebrates 10 Northeast day-hikes that will "make your knees week." Inside, the magazine enthusiastically labels them "butt kickers, heart pounders and lung busters."

In other words, hiking is a dandy body-tuning workout, and you won't see many fatsos along the AT. Thru-hikers shed between 10 and 30 pounds during the trek, which typically takes half a year. Of course, there are limit-pushing maniacs who "hike" the trail in less than two months, a feat that requires running the flats and downhills.

Ted and I are in good shape (he runs, lifts weights, and plays full-court basketball once a week), so we had plenty of wind and quad power for the climb, but by the time we reached the ridge, we were fully lathered and glad for the cool breezes.

We stopped to rest at Pulpit Rock, a vertiginous ledge that offers a panoramic view of the Lehigh Valley. While we basked in the sun, watching the turkey vultures glide and swoop, we reveled in the peace and solitude. But not for long. Out of the trees came a voice, a hearty greeting, and we were joined by another hiker. He was a lanky man, 58 years old, a newly retired Xerox technician bound for Maine. A few minutes later, four middle-aged women showed up and stopped to picnic. They were headed for Virginia. For the last decade or so, they've attacked a different piece of the trail each year.

The AT is a place that will let you be lonely, but come warm weather, you inevitably will encounter people. We also met a young Canadian couple on their way north and an elderly man and his son out for a day-hike. When we reached our destination, the Pinnacle, it was overrun by school kids on a field trip.

There, we perched on a gravity-defying cantilevered shelf and ate lunch. A thousand feet below spread a magnificent patchwork of farms, woods and rolling hills. Only the summery haze kept us from seeing forever. And only one thing spoiled the moment:

Some idiot nearby was pounding on bongos. I wanted to throttle the jerk and throw him off the mountain. But after a swig of Gatorade and a few bites of my meatball grinder, my blood sugar rose and my mood became less homicidal, even though the sandwich was soggy and cold, thanks to the ice.

"It would have been good about three hours ago, when it was hot," I muttered.

Ted took it all in stride. He's a mellow man, and being on the AT made him mellower still. "I like solitude and getting out of the city and being in the woods," Ted said. "I need to be immersed in nature on a periodic basis, to not just drive by the woods, or look at the woods, but to be in the woods. Hiking the trail challenges the body, revives the mind and refreshes the spirit."

Art Carey's e-mail address is acarey@phillynews.com.