

Deadline

by Whit Rummel

TODAY IS THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY of the greatest adventure of my life: a continuous, solo thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, a total of 2,181 miles. I'm still amazed it happened.



During the more than four months it took, I met many wonderful people. My fellow thru-hikers and I, though a good 90% of them were at the opposite end of the age spectrum, shared the intimate bond of attempting to complete our once-in-a-lifetime trek. Just as inspirational were the hundreds of folks I met when I hitchhiked into the half-forgotten towns along the way to resupply. Most were still reeling from the economic downturn, but their unwavering generosity and compassion truly renewed my faith in the American Spirit.

A lot of friends have asked, “What possessed you to do such a thing?” After all, I’d never even been on an overnight hike and knew nothing about the equipment or the skills or the stamina it would take to accomplish such a journey.

It turns out my answer is a little more complicated than they expect. And “possessed” has more than a little to do with it. You see, my father dropped dead a week after his birthday when I was a kid. Poof, gone, just like that. No warning, no goodbye. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt guilt for saying the terrible things I did the last time I saw him. And anger too, because he died before I got a chance to take those words back. Most of all, though, I felt dread; I was convinced I was going to die like he did — suddenly and prematurely and at exactly the same age. After all, everyone said I was just like him — same body type, same fingers and toes, same smile, same sense of humor. Hell, I even had the exact same name.

