

trail MAGIC

TRAIL MAGIC. WHAT IS IT? WHAT DOES THAT term mean to you? I think it is one of those terms that have a slightly different meaning to each individual. One Appalachian Trail website defines it as “any act of kindness, or gift bestowed on hikers, including

water, meals, transportation, lodging, or even money.” Others have defined it as simply “spontaneous (or random) acts of kindness.” But in my 40 some years of hiking on the A.T., I believe the meaning of the term “Trail magic” has changed from what it may have meant to hikers 30 years ago, and what it means to most hikers today. And it is now becoming a controversial issue with many involved in caring for and maintaining the A.T.

After recently retiring, I decided to get back out on the Trail for some long-distance hiking. It had been 15 years since I did any hiking of this length on the A.T., and I wanted to reconnect with the Trail community, maybe see some old Trail friends, and relive some of my past A.T. adventures. While as a Potomac A.T. Club member and maintainer (I take care of a hut in Shenandoah National Park) I was connected to the A.T. in that way, and would run into thru-hikers every year while doing maintenance, it is not the same as being out on the Trail for a long-distance hike. In my little Trail world in Shenandoah I wasn't really tuned in to many of the big changes that have taken place on the A.T. in recent years.

One of those changes is in the nature and amount of what is called Trail magic. I am not sure when I first heard the term used, but I know it was in use by the early 1980s. In those days that term seemed to apply to some event that was sort of magical and serendipitous, or even mystical in nature. An example would be the occasions when something that you needed would “magically” appear on the Trail, or at a shelter, just when you needed it. This might have been food, or a ride somewhere, but more often it was something else.

In 1999, on a Springer Mountain to Hot Springs, North Carolina hike, I discovered that I could not make out the small details on the Trail map I was carrying. My eyes were getting old. I needed reading glasses, but had not realized it until then. At the very next shelter I came to, still in Georgia, there was a pair of inexpensive reading glasses someone had left behind. Problem solved. Trail magic. I used those glasses the rest of that hike. This type of occurrence happened often enough that a lot of old Trail friends, most of them repeat thru-hikers, had another term for it: “the Trail will provide.”

Another type of Trail magic would fall into the “it's a small world” category. Running into an old Trail friend on the A.T., or in a Trail town, you met years before in another location. For example, in 1984, as part of a loose group of thru-hikers that became known as the “Lost Wave,” we had reached MA Rt. 2, in northern Massachusetts, and wanted to get into North Adams for food. As we stood at the

little parking spot where the Trail went north from the highway (there were six of us together at that point), we were trying to decide how we were going to break up into smaller groups to start hitchhiking, when I noticed that the large RV parked there had an A.T. sticker on the back, and a North Carolina license plate (the state I lived in). So while my friends were discussing food and North Adams, I went to the front of the RV and saw that the owners were inside. I waved and introduced myself. They were an older couple, from western North Carolina, section hiking the A.T. As we talked and I told them what we were doing, they offered to give us all a ride into North Adams, which we gladly accepted.

Fast forward two years, to 1986, I was in Monson, Maine at Shaw's Hiker Hostel. It was late afternoon and I had gone outside to look for the fellow I had been hiking with for the last month (whose Trail name was “Col. Joe”) so we could start talking about dinner. As I looked around I heard a car horn, and saw Col. Joe waving at me through the front window of an RV parked in Shaw's side yard. I went over, stepped up into the RV, and joined the conversation inside. As I sat there, mostly listening, I started feeling this strong déjà vu vibe. Then I realized I was sitting in the same RV, with the same couple that had given me a ride in Massachusetts two years earlier. We all had a good laugh about that, and then spent the rest of the afternoon and evening talking Trail and having dinner like long-lost friends. That was “small world” Trail magic.

Yet, the best example of what I mean by small world Trail magic occurred on a 2015 A.T. hike in New England. I was staying the night at the home/hostel of Jess Treat, in Sheffield, Massachusetts. Jess was away, on vacation, and her nephew was filling in for her. He and I got to talking about dinner and we decided to share in an expedition to Great Barrington to get pizza. He drove, and I paid for the pizza. On the way back to the hostel he wanted to stop at the supermarket for something. While in there he spotted a young couple that he identified as thru-hikers and asked them where they were spending the night. They said they were not sure, as they had not intended to still be in town that late in the day. He offered them a special “couples price” at the hostel, which they decided to accept.

Later that evening, sitting on the large, enclosed front porch, the couple was explaining to me why they were in town in the first place. It seems that the day before, while on top of Mount Everett, the man had left his bandana hanging on some branches. This bandana was apparently very important to him. So important that they got off the Trail, came into Great

Barrington, and got a motel room. He then called a friend that lived somewhere nearby, and asked the friend to come and pick him up and drive him as close to the top of Mount Everett as they could get, so he could hike up there and retrieve his bandana. By the time the friend picked him up and they drove there it was late at night, so he hiked up to the top in the dark but failed to find his bandana. The next day found them sleeping late, and being slow to get going and back on the Trail, which is when our paths crossed.

I asked the young man if his bandana was multi-

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH? WHAT IS BEST FOR THE A.T. AND ALL THE USERS OF THE TRAIL?

colored, and he said yes it was. I told him I thought I had it, and I went to my backpack in the house and pulled out the bandana I had found, hanging on some branches, on top of Mount Everett the day before. I brought it to him, and I swear the look on his face almost brought tears to my eyes. I don't know why that bandana was so important to him, but he was one happy camper. The series of chance meetings and coincidences that put us together, allowing him to get his bandana back is remarkable. That is Trail magic.

But most of the time on the A.T. of today, when someone refers to Trail magic they mean a stash of food and drink left along the Trail or at a road crossing for the hikers to partake of. Or a “Trail angel” providing goodies, or transportation to the passing hikers. It seems to mean receiving, or giving, food and drink more than anything else.

This may be because there is so much of that type of Trail magic occurring along the A.T. now. On my recent hikes I saw it very frequently. Perhaps too frequently. For some hikers it is starting to detract from the A.T. experience, for a variety of reasons. Don't get me wrong, I have received Trailside magic of this type many times and appreciated it every time. I have handed out goodies, and put on hiker feeds many times. But, for some hikers, it takes away from the experience they were looking for, especially when they come across it every day, or sometimes multiple times a day.

With so many people hiking on the A.T. now, and so many former thru-hikers out there wanting to go back out to the Trail and reconnect, by providing Trail magic, it is starting to become a problem at times. I



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wonder, with the increasing popularity of the A.T., if we could see a time in the future where there is a Trail magic table of goodies set up at every road crossing, or multiple places along any given section of Trail, perhaps even competing with each other to see who can attract the most hikers. Sound ridiculous? Don't be too sure.

One type of Trail magic that is causing a problem now is when someone leaves a collection of food and drink, especially along the side of the Trail, or at shelter, but does not stay there with the food, etc. That Trail magic can quickly become an unsightly pile of trash. It can attract bears and other critters. It could be harmful to animals that get into it. Even if the person who left it is coming back to collect the remains, in the meantime, it can be seen as garbage. This is becoming a problem for some of the A.T. maintainers who are, increasingly, cleaning up some of these Trail magic leftovers.

There are other concerns listed in a 2006 Appalachian Trail Conservancy issue report titled "*Trail Magic*" *Along the Appalachian Trail*, such as, "Excessive crowding and trampling-related impacts," as when a large number of hikers gather around a big trailside hiker feed, which can often happen, especially when some of these large Trail magic feeds are advertised up and down the A.T. With the smart phones and social media being used by most thru-hikers today this can quickly produce a crowd way too large for the site.

Trail Magic is an emotional subject for many hikers and for the people providing it. Strangers bestowing acts of kindness on A.T. hikers is a tradition documented in the earliest thru-hiker accounts. Most A.T. hikers have fond memories of receiving, or giving this type of Trail magic. Many thru-hikers have said being given food or drink by strangers, or even more, being brought home by strangers, and being housed and fed, renewed their "faith in humanity." For the people giving the Trail magic it is also an emotional and rewarding experience. It often gives people, who might not otherwise be involved, a way to connect to the A.T.

By writing this I hope to start a larger conversation about Trail magic. How much is too much? What is best for the A.T. and all the users of the Trail?

When I shared my thoughts through this essay with the ATC's information services manager Laurie Potteiger, she sent me a quote from an '06 thru-hiker that describes an ideal type of Trail magic beautifully. "Trail magic is not just the kindness of people you meet along the Trail, but the Trail itself; it looks out for those who tread its path," he explains. "For me, one of the best times I experienced this [kind of] Trail magic [happened] as I got up onto Franconia Ridge and took a look around; it was a beautiful, clear, sunny day and I felt like I was on top of the world — I don't think that grin left my face until I was out of the Whites." Now *that* is magic. ⚡