

Interview with Ruth Hartzler



Stuart English

We understand that you have lived in this area quite a while. Tell us about your education, your work, and what brought you to WNC.

I was one of very few women at a major engineering school in the 1960s, studying math, and then also in my early career. Times were different then, and I had a lot of experiences in these formative years that were either challenging or humorous. A significant event involves my freshman calculus professor, a shy bachelor. The women's movement hadn't developed momentum yet, and I didn't know anything about it. When I excelled on one freshman math exam, and then did poorly on the next, my math professor called me to his office. This was intimidating back in those days, since my scholarship was on the line. He suggested that I read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a ground-breaking women's movement book, which had just been published. I still marvel at how brave and perceptive he was.

After one technical meeting during my early career, I was told by an executive that had attended the meeting that "You think just like a man." It was supposed to be a compliment!

I graduated from college at the height of the Cold War and my math and Russian language education was attractive to the National Security Agency. I went through the agency's thorough background-check and interview process, including lie detector test, but decided that career was too "spooky" for me. The NSA is currently getting bad press, with issues that need addressing, but I believe they do important work.

I worked for several consulting companies in the Washington, D. C. area related to transportation planning and federal energy policy. For example, one computer model that I worked on back in the 1970s attempted to forecast the reduction in oil imports as a result of various levels of energy conservation tax credits. Along the way, I got part way through a masters degree in modern dance, but decided to stick with math. So, I received a masters degree in Operations Research, a field that most people never heard of.

Why and when did you join CMC?

In 1981, I made a decision that was the worst and the best at the same time. I joined my boyfriend in his dream to live in the mountains of Western North Carolina. He introduced me to the joys of hiking and backpacking, and I worked as a statistician and quality engineer for American Enka Co. and then BASF. When our relationship ended in 1991, I missed hiking most. Luckily, a friend suggested that I join CMC.

You have been an active hiker and hike leader. What are some of your favorite hikes and memorable experiences hiking over the years?

I've hiked in Hawaii and the Grand Canyon, and backpacked in Rocky Mountain National Park and the Wind Rivers in Wyoming. These experiences were awesome. I like the AT from Sam Gap to Devil Fork Gap for flower displays, and the AT over Hump Mountain for views. I like many sections of the MST nearby for flowers and accessibility. Actually, I like any trail that I happen to be on.

But my favorite hike is the Art Loeb Trail over Pilot Mountain to Farlow Gap in early May. Elizabeth Fiel gave me this hike. She scouted it with me, suggested the best time to lead it, and trained me on wildflower identification. I am grateful to her. Bruce and I scheduled it for the Sunday and Wednesday hikes several years ago and hit the flower peak. I loved

watching the large group of hikers marveling at the spectacular canopies of pink shell azaleas and blankets of trout lilies.

Coincidentally, the Courthouse Creek timber project that the Forest Service is currently planning abuts the Art Loeb Trail at Farlow Gap. CMC's efforts, led by our Conservation Committee, have been instrumental in the Forest Service's decision to avoid logging a tract at Farlow Gap. The Forest Service wants to decommission the Summey Cove Trail as part of this project. Conservation Chair Tish Desjardins is working with the Forest Service to try to save the trail.

You were on the CMC Council and were Councilor for Conservation. You received the Award of Appreciation for your work with the Conservation Committee. How did Conservation become an important issue for you?

I care about our spectacular hiking environment and felt that most CMC members do also. So, when I retired, I wanted to continue the efforts of past CMC leaders to protect our hiking experience. CMC's opinions have impact on government decisions involving trails, due to the valuable contributions of our trail maintaining members, our large membership, and the economic draw of our extensive slate of scheduled hikes.

What are some Conservation issues now and in the future that you feel are most important and why?

Currently, the most important issue is the process to revise the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Management Plans. We have a say in the plans that will serve as the guide for important forest decisions for the next fifteen years. Our hiking territory is under pressure from reduced budgets, growing usage from increasing population and tourism, and multiple recreational and develop demands. We have a say, and we should use this opportunity.

How has CMC changed since you have been a member?

I marvel at how CMC's core missions have not changed --- 400 miles of trails maintained and 150 hikes scheduled and led by a group of dedicated volunteers that love trails and hiking, plus the continuation of the conservation legacy of CMC's early leaders.

Could you speculate on the future of CMC and Ruth Hartzler?

CMC will continue its mission as new talented members continue to move into leadership. It's up to us to protect the hiking environment and I will be there.