

Danny Bernstein



*As a hiker following the blazes, I wonder “Why did they put the trail here? Why so many bends and undulations up these hills?” Who are these “they” and how do they decide exactly where to put the trail? Hikers often take this work for granted. I talked to Piet Bodenhorst, the CMC council member representing trail maintenance.*

“You remember the piece of trail that you personally built. Trail work gives me a sense of accomplishment.” Piet Bodenhorst, a burly man with baby blue eyes wearing a red bandana catching the sweat off his head, explains why he is out here organizing 45 people to build a section of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Piet has been interviewed in more regional publications than any other CMC member. He and his work crew have captured the imagination of many magazine editors working in their air-conditioned offices. The latest article is in this month’s (December, 2005) Mountain Maturity, a free magazine

available around Buncombe County.

Piet was born in Holland but moved to Ecuador as a small child where his father was in the import/export business. He remembers that one of his greatest achievements was buying his first factory-made suit. “I was used to having a hand-made suit. Of course, now a hand-made suit costs a lot more.”

He first came to the U.S. as a student at Lowell College in Massachusetts to study textile chemistry. He spent his whole career as a carpet chemist, retiring as a V.P. for Mohawk Carpets in Dublin, Georgia. “Do you realize that in straight dollar terms, carpet is one of the few things that are cheaper today than 50 years ago?” Piet said. “It is much cheaper than other flooring.”

When he and his wife, Jan, decided to retire, they started looking for the perfect place in the mid-south. “Basically, we went up and down the Blue Ridge Parkway.” They built a house in the Eastmore section of Swannanoa where they can see the Blue Ridge Parkway and Waynesville, on a good air day. But neither Jan nor Piet are spending their time looking out their views. Jan sings with the Asheville Choral Society and grows orchids and Piet is on the trail.

*How did you get involved with the trail crew?*

“When I first joined CMC in 1999, I went hiking but I realized that I was not in shape for hiking. I met Phil Smith and tried trail work and I was hooked.”

Piet credits three aspects of trail work that keeps him going. First, the discipline of going where the need is.

“You don’t just go on your favorite trail – you go where the work needs to be done.”

“Second, it’s the camaraderie with the fellows which is very important to me.”

And third, Piet notes the personal sense of accomplishment. “Different people have different expertise. For example, rockwork is very challenging but it’s also fun. Rocks need to fit in just so.”

After Phil Smith died, Piet took over as the trail crew organizer and head of the Friday trail crew. He also leads the effort to build a new section of the MST west of Balsam Gap, a project which

brought out over 45 people the last Saturday work day. He divided people into seven groups, each group doing its own task. Piet walked back and forth, helping, encouraging, and consulting with each team. Piet admits that it's hard to organize all these people so he tries to subdivide the training.

"It's good when I can put new people with experience people, one to one. If we can get a person to do trail maintenance three times, they're hooked and they become regulars. Then we assign them their own tools and they take care of them."

*What about women on the weekly trail crew?*

"We have women who come out but not on a regular basis and they're usually younger. So when they see a 72-year old man, the average age of the trail crew, who comes out every week, they think they have to keep up with him. But it's not a contest. You do what you can. On these Saturday workdays, women have to be a little more aggressive and ask for the job they want. Otherwise, they'll get assigned to whatever job is left over."

*Why is trail building going to take so long?*

Fifteen miles of trail have been approved from Balsam Gap west toward the Smokies. So far, four miles have been done and blazed. But the Monday/Wednesday/Friday crews have to respond to maintenance items first.

Piet explained that building a trail out of a side hill is slow and laborious. The small narrow track bull dozer used by professional crews is not for the MST. "Those earth movers destroy too much forest. They are OK for trails in a housing development or Biltmore Estate but not for hiking trails in the woods. Manual work is a thing of the past. It is difficult to buy the right tools."

*How can others help?*

Weekly trail crews waste time looking for problems that may not exist or are identified in the wrong location. It would be very helpful if the sweep of every hike would log problems encountered on the trail. Piet is now working with Bruce Bente on a procedure to do that for trails that CMC maintains.

If every crew would report back what they did, it would get the problem off the list and we wouldn't waste time hunting for the problem.

Section maintainers should maintain their trails. In particular, if you use a weed eater early in the year, in May, it will make the job a lot easier later in the year. If you wait till August, you're going to have very high weeds.

Something to think about the next time we're hiking on a trail.