

Jim Reel: Hiker, Leader, and Union Activist **By Danny Bernstein**

Jim Reel wears many hats.



Figure 1 Photo by Sawako Jager

Jim is a Marion native who still lives on his family's property almost surrounded by kinfolk. He considers himself a city kid who grew up on top of a hill in a residential area, less than a quarter mile from downtown Marion. He is the fifth or maybe the sixth James Reel in his family line. The Reels used to own hundreds of acres but over the generations, the land was subdivided and whittled down. Jim now owns three acres, which to me, still seems like an awful lot of property.

"We visited my mother's family in Burnsville for a week during the summer. That was my only mountain experience when I was growing up."

Jim got married right out of high school and has two sons in their thirties and one granddaughter.

Union Work

Jim has been a maintenance mechanic, welder, crane operator, and all-around highly skilled

machinist at SGL Carbon in Morganton for 37 years. Jim is a proud union member of the Chemical Workers Union and was president of his local union for nine years.

His American Government class in high school made a big impression on him. He still remembers learning that in the early 1900s bosses used to say

"If you don't come in on Sunday, don't come in on Monday."

Though North Carolina is an open shop state, (that means that workers don't have to join their local union), only a couple of guys are not part of the union. "Now I help the younger union leaders in my shop with union work."

Joining Carolina Mountain Club

Jim's introduction to CMC took a circuitous route.

Jamie, one of the guys at work, invited Jim on his first backpack. The two fellows did 20 miles in three days on the Appalachian Trail close to Watauga Lake. Jim had a pup tent. His other backpacking equipment was lousy. On top of it, it snowed. When the weather got warmer, the snow turned to rain.

But Jim was hooked on backpacking and wanted to go again. So he and his hiking friend started doing the A.T. in sections. He remembers that his first trip was on April 20, 1999, the day of the Columbine shooting. That's also when he saw his first columbine flower.

They kept scheduling weeklong backpacks in April. On their trip to Vermont, Jim learned what post holing was. That's when you try to walk in deep snow and sink up to your knees or higher.

He joined the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and said to himself. "One of these days I need to join CMC and do some trail maintenance." He finally became a member in 2006 and adopted a section of the A.T. Now he maintains 4.1 miles from the top of Bluff Mountain to Garenflo Gap. [I walked that section recently. It is perfect.]

Sierra Club Leader

With his time and service at work, Jim gets lots of vacation time and uses it well.

Jim is one of two active CMC members who also lead Sierra Club trips. He had gone on a Sierra Club trip as a participant and was asked to consider working toward becoming a trip leader. Becoming a Sierra Club trip leader is not easy. Before you even go to their leadership training, you have to plan a sample trip including the logistics and meals. You learn how to screen calls to make sure that your participants will be able to make the trip successfully. Then there's wilderness first aid and working out emergency scenarios. The training takes a week.

"I started as an assistant leader but after one trip, I became a leader." Jim leads backpack trips in the Rocky Mountain area and co-leads float trips in Florida.

Even after all this training, leading a Sierra Club trip is challenging. On one of Jim's trips, a man refused to be part of the group and ran on ahead. On another trip, a participant had to be evacuated because his blisters were about to turn septic.

This year, Jim will stay close to home. He's volunteering the whole week at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy Biennial Conference. Next year, he'll be leading a trip in the [Anaconda Pintler Wilderness](#) in South West Montana.

CMC Councilor

Jim has been on the CMC Council for almost six years. Currently he's Councilor for Hiking but he's moving on to other outdoor leadership positions.

"I'll be happy to talk with anyone who is interested in the position." Under his watch, the committee has created a CMC Meet-up group. Jim and others on the committee are always on the lookout for new leaders.

If you had visitors and could take them on one hike, what would it be?

Jim wanted to suggest a backpack. He describes it as follows:

First, schedule this easy three-day backpack on a full moon.

Take the A.T. from Carvers Gap to Grassy Ridge. Get off the A.T. to camp on Grassy Ridge.

The second day, continue north to Bradley Gap where you'll camp. At sundown, walk up to the rocks toward Hump Mt. You'll see the sun going down. Turn around to see the moon rising. It's a spectacular sight.

The last day, continue north on the A.T. over Hump Mt. to 19 E.

"It's only 15 miles in three days but it's the right way to do it." Hmmm, maybe Jim will lead this trip next year.

Jim suggested the last question.

If you could hike with anyone in history, (past or present), who would you like to hike with?

I would love to take Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir on the A.T. The hike would give us plenty of time to talk politics. If Teddy Roosevelt came back as a Republican today, he'd be hung. But I would tell him that he was my kind of Republican and a true Conservative. He conserved a lot of land.