



Bernard Elias - 10/26/2005

by Danny Bernstein

*When I moved to WNC, the first book I read about the area was *Strangers in High Places* by Michael Frome. Among the many pictures sprinkled throughout the book was familiar face; it was Bernard Elias.*

Almost 87 years old, Bernard Elias is the oldest member and has the longest tenure in the Carolina Mountain Club. Bernard, an Asheville native, has been a Navy photographer, a film-processing specialist for Kodak, and a world traveler but he is best known locally as a hiker and expert on

Southern Appalachians trails.

Wearing his red Swiss guide hat, Bernard explains his initial fascination with the mountains. He recalled that in 1929, the Asheville Times (precursor of the A-C-T) organized a ten-day expedition in the Smokies. And at that time, it was an expedition. The explorers took ten homing pigeons with them in the woods to deliver the news of their progress. Each day, they wrote up what they had done, put the report in a tiny aluminum capsule tied to the pigeon's leg and sent the bird back to Asheville.

"I was 10 at the time. I couldn't wait for the paper to be delivered. That's how I got so interested in the Smokies."

The Smoky Mountains Hiking Club had a similar expedition from Knoxville and the two groups met on Clingman's Dome. One member of the North Carolina expedition was an Eagle Scout. "So I joined the scouts as soon as I could." Bernard said.

Bernard grew up in Biltmore Forest and still lives in his family home. When he was 14, Bernard and a friend laid on the grass and looked up toward Mt. Pisgah. They wondered how

difficult it would be to walk from their neighborhood to the top of the mountain and they decided to try it. The boys didn't have sleeping bags so they took army blankets, a pup tent and cans of food - no freeze-dry packages at that time. They jumped the fence into Biltmore Estate - the estate was not as patrolled as it is now - and got someone to row them across the French Broad. From there, in the days before the Blue Ridge Parkway, all they had to guide them was the Shut-In Trail, a route originally built by George Vanderbilt to take him from his Estate to Buck Spring Lodge. The boys took two days to reach Mt. Pisgah.

Bernard stayed in the scouts, became an Eagle Scout and that led to joining CMC in 1941; Arch Nichols was president. In those days, women were sometimes barred from exploratory trips.

"We wanted to explore a section of Linville Gorge but we were all unfamiliar with that area. Then it was considered the wildest area in Western North Carolina. We didn't know what was involved and how deep the river crossings would be. So we felt it might be too much for the women and we didn't allow them to come on this trip." One woman complained and it never happened again.

During WWII, Bernard was a navy photographer and that led to a career with Kodak, first in Hollywood and later in Rochester. In the early 1950s, he had the opportunity to go to India with a company that made educational films on such topics as "How to keep your well clean".

"At the time," Bernard recalls, "movie theaters in India had to show these films before the main movie." After that assignment, he toured the country, rode elephants, and skied for the first time. He went tiger hunting with a New Zealand man he had met in Bombay at the Taj Mahal hotel, the only hotel at the time with European standards. He shot photos and movies while the other guy hunted but fortunately, Bernard said, "he never got a tiger."

His greatest contributions to the hiking community

Bernard considers the *100 Favorite Trails of the Great Smokies and Carolina Blue Ridge* as his greatest accomplishment. He first developed the map in 1966. According to Bernard, five or six people from CMC and the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club divided up the trails to consider them for the map. After that first effort, Bernard took over the project completely and updated the map 13 times. "I rewalked 10-12 trails a year to check them."

The map spans from Boone, NC to west of the Smokies in TN. The back side describes each hike including the closest road, hike distance, and altitude gain.

“You could scan the map without having to read five or six pages in a trail guide for each hike.” Both the National Park Service and National Geographic used the map as a reference. The map sold for a dollar. Now, 12 years after its last publication, those lucky enough to still have one have been offered upwards of \$300 for it. Several of the hikes are now on private land, where hikers have to negotiate permission including Cold Mountain from Crawford Creek Road.

His second major contribution was more recent. Bernard was a good friend of Bill Kirkman, an early member of CMC. When Kirkman died, his estate, including thousands of slides, went to his niece.

“Bill was very meticulous and labeled all his slides,” Bernard said. Bill’s niece was at a loss of what to do with all these photos but recognized the value of the collection. She called Bernard. With Pete Steurer, the club historian, Bernard negotiated with the Special Collections librarian at UNCA, Helen Wykle, to create and house CMC material at the Ramsey Library. This collection now incorporates copies of *Let’s Go*, council minutes, as well as Kirkman’s 3,000 slides.

After a career that took him all over the world, Bernard came back to Asheville and went to work for Ball photography, then located on Wall Street. Later the shop moved to Innsbruck Mall where they are today.

Gerry McNabb remembers that he first met Bernard shortly after joining the club in 1964.

“I then knew him later when I was a customer at Ball Photo. I was very interested in photography, and soon discovered he was extremely knowledgeable about it. He has been a friend for a long time now. Bernard is extremely thorough in all he does and totally dedicated to the causes he is passionate about. He has a memory that could be the envy of a teenager. Bernard is unique.”

Conservation

Bernard explained that the CMC was historically very involved in conservation issues. One of the club’s biggest successes was the Wilderness designation for Shining Rock in 1964. Arch Nichols and Nina Forbes, along with the Georgia ATC, took the lead on that issue.

Bernard and other long-time members also give Arch Nichols credit for saving Max Patch. Max Patch was private land until 1982. One of its owners, Max, grew potatoes and turnips, hence

the name, Max Patch. Max also grazed a flock of sheep up there. A developer bought the land and wanted to make it a resort area. That upset many people including Arch Nichols. According to Bernard, since Nichols worked for the Forest Service, he knew the ins and outs of that system. So Nichols convinced the Forest Service to buy the 392 acres for the Appalachian Trail. Roy Taylor, then the local Congressman, got Congress to appropriate the money and CMC built the A.T. trail.

“It’s great that we saved Max Patch. Funnily enough,” Bernard recalls, “it was not that difficult to convince the owner to sell to the Forest Service. Maybe the developer realized that it was so remote he would not get too many customers, as was the case on nearby Camp Creek Bald.”

Bernard and many CMC members were very active in opposing the Transmountain Road through the Smokies in the 1960s. This proposed road was supposed to be an alternative solution to the North Shore Road. The 35 mile road would rise from Monteith Branch, climb the upper reaches of Hazel Creek, cross the divide at Buckeye Gap, and connect Bryson City with Townsend, Tennessee. At the time, Swain County said that they would agree to substitute the new transmountain road for the one specified in the 1943 agreement.

“We organized CMC members to go to meetings and write letters opposing the road. We worked as hard on that as people are working now against the North Shore Road on Fontana Lake,” Bernard said. In 1967, the Secretary of the Interior killed the project.

Bernard is not leaving the North Shore Road controversy to younger people. “As for the NSR, I am violently opposed to it.” He followed his belief with action and wrote detailed comments to the National Park Service on his support for the financial settlement with Swain County. On his manual typewriter, he commented that “the road would be a desecration to the wilderness and to the classic bear habitat of the area.”