

Meet Allen De Hart - August 2010

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If the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) is North Carolina's Appalachian Trail, Allen De Hart is its Myron Avery. Allen has walked the MST, designed much of it and helped build it, written about it and started a Friends group to be its champion. A few months ago, when snow and ice made it tough to hike in the mountains, I went to Louisburg, northeast of Raleigh and had the privilege to talk to Allen.

Allen considers himself a mountain boy. He was born and grew up in Patrick County, Virginia - the closest town is Stuart, birth place of Jebb Stewart, a Confederate Army officer. While growing up, he attended a Methodist church one week and the Church of the Brethren the next. When he played with African American children, he asked his mother why God had made black people. She said "God loves different colors. He loves diversity, just like the diverse flowers in the woods."

Allen's father had died before he was born. His grandfather, a businessman, wanted Allen to be a clergyman (Allen's first name is Shepherd) and gave him some land and a car. So in 1943, Allen went to a bible college after high school - in those days, high school in his area only went to the 11th grade. He lasted two weeks. It broke his mother's heart when he came home and told her that he didn't have the calling to be a minister.



"I was concerned that my grandfather would take back the car and everything else he gave me. I was interested in education, art design, and literature. Ironically when I went into the army, I was appointed chaplain. They saw that I had read the bible many times." Allen said.

Allen received an MA in history at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. In his class, he met a woman, Flora, who became his study partner and later his wife.

"I got an internship at Duke as part of my Ph.D. studies. On the way back from one of my trips, a friend suggested that I visit Louisburg College, the oldest two-year church related college (Methodist) in the country. There were two openings: a history professor and an English professor (his wife was in English). My wife and I were given a Southern welcome. I was impressed with the college and its academic

standards and the salary.

"We can buy a beach house in a year's time," he recalls saying to Flora.

They accepted jobs at Louisburg and Allen never finished his Ph.D. Allen also became a college administrator when he became interested in student union life. He brought in entertainment and lectures from outside the area so that students would have more than an academic education. This effort later became the National Association for Campus Activities.

When he was 10 years old in 1936, he was a water boy for the Civilian Conservation Corps while they built the Blue Ridge Parkway. He had an uncle who was an engineer. "And I also heard about the A.T." [The A.T. was finished in 1937.]

When Allen was 12 years old, he built a 0.7 mile trail from his house to the school. He figured out it was faster to walk to school that way than to take the school bus. The trail blended in with its surroundings; it was a piece of art.

Allen hiked the A.T. in 1978. His trail name was Earthdaddy, a name given to him by his students.

"My goal was to hike in all the states. I'm missing just four states. I should really go to do this."

"Thirty years ago, I wrote North Carolina Hiking Trails. It was the first book of trails across the state, published by Appalachian Mountain Club Books." In those days, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy said that it needed a description of trails connecting to the A.T. in North Carolina. Allen volunteered to write these up. But his publisher thought that the book was too thin so they suggested adding North Carolina trails in the Smokies, then other trails. The book, now in its 4th edition, contains 1,300 trails.

He has written 11 books and numerous articles. "When I started writing, I wanted to be in a mainstream and understand how publishers worked. I joined writers groups. I come from a family of organizers. A dairy farm where I grew up teaches you organization. Cows don't wait. I also look for people who are organized."

To write his guides, he measured the trail mileage with a wheel and used topo maps for altitude. "Pedometers don't work. Math teaches you that there's only one right answer." He carries a notebook and created his own code when taking notes.

"There is lots of public information but it's not well catalogued. I depend on official information. To work with public agencies, you have to be a diplomat, an inquisitor, a writer with a head."

But his greatest accomplishment is the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Kate Dixon, Executive Director of the Friends of the MST says, "Without Allen, there would be no Mountains-to-Sea Trail today. Since 1977 when the trail was first proposed, Allen became its fierce advocate. When progress slowed almost to a standstill in the 1990s, he devised a route and set off hiking with a friend to rebuild enthusiasm and show that the dream could be made real. He wrote a book which allowed others to follow in his footsteps. He founded Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea

Trail. Through his passion and knowledge of trail building, he has recruited and trained many of the trail builders and maintainers who care for more than 400 miles of trail and extend it forward every day."

After the North Carolina Trails Act was passed in 1973, Allen was on the North Carolina Trails committee for 16 years. The committee kept hearing from people asking for money for their particular trail.

"We needed to think about all trails - hiking, biking, paddling, and equestrians. We didn't have money for all of them."

In September 1977, the Division of Parks and Recreation in the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development proposed a "Mountains-to-Sea Trail" (MST) that would serve as a hiking trail across the state. At the same time, North Carolina was proposing a bicycle route through the state. If a bike route, why not a hiking route?

It was an exciting project but as time went on, Allen felt that the Division was not giving the MST the attention it needed. They wanted Carolina Mountain Club and other clubs to drop the MST name. Allen and Doris Hammett of the Highlands group objected.

"So I thought I needed to form my own organization so that the state will have to give us more attention. Once the MST gets into your system, you can't let it go." He formed Friends of the MST. He is still on the board as Trail Counsel and Specialist.

"I like a mission and a challenge. I promised Arch Nichols (of CMC) that I would finish the section from Blowing Rock to Stone Mountain."

"There are lots of parts of the MST that can be walked now, piece by piece. Another piece will open shortly east of Boone. Soon you'll be able to walk from Clingmans Dome in the Smokies to Stone Mountain State Park, over 330 miles, on trail. That will become a national story." (When the route through the Smokies becomes official - Ed.)

CMC's Don Walton who is also a Friends of the MST board member recalls, "About 14 years ago, I was designing a MST brochure and sent it to Allen for review. It had "MTS" listed many times as the acronym for the Mountains to Sea Trail. MTS was what all of Western North Carolina used at that time. Allen called me and in due time gave me a grammar lesson that I have never forgot. I have used MST faithfully since."

Again, from Kate Dixon, "The MST is the most complex conservation project ever undertaken in North Carolina, and Allen's hard work, vision, and passion for the trail are paying off as more and more hikers have a chance to explore North Carolina's extraordinary beauty – from the mountains to the sea."

Allen has tremendous amounts of drive, physical and mental energy. Besides his books, and the MST, Allen started two De Hart Botanical Gardens; one in Virginia has 200 acres and the other one next to his house in Louisburg with 88 acres. Several rare plants were found on his land and he and his wife decided to make it a sanctuary. The Louisburg garden has a lake and two loop trails. His gardens are in a trust and will live on after he and his wife are gone.

And his next challenge? "When I go to heaven, if there's no A.T., I'm going to build one."