

Waterfalls, Hiking, and Maintenance, Oh My! (The essence of Jack Fitzgerald)



By Ann Hendrickson

If I make it to heaven, I imagine I will arrive to a perfectly maintained big view mountain trail that leads to a pristine waterfall. At the base of the waterfall will be the leader/maintainer himself, Jack Fitzgerald, meditating, hazel hoe at his side, Buddhist bells and dorje in each hand, and a bag of 3 mint flavored Oreos peeking out of his pocket. A rapt group of M& Mer's will be silently surrounding this WNC legend. (Most folks would agree that the only questionable part of this "vision" is whether I succeed in witnessing it.)

"Do you know Jack?!" was inevitably a question I was asked when I became a trail maintainer; and wherever I hiked; and at every waterfall I went to! My interest in meeting this fellow was piqued. Most mere mortals are identified with a given name and a surname. Then, there are people such as Beyoncé, Hillary, or JACK that have such a reputation and standing that the one name is readily recognizable by the masses. Now several years later, I have the good fortune of spending weekly trail time hiking and/or maintaining with Jack. I can attest to the fact that Jack is a rare gem and that CMC has the good fortune of calling him a member!

Folklore aside, there are a few tidbits of Jack's background to be shared. Here is part of the conversation; the rest Jack will readily share on a trail, or at lunch time on the Friday Asheville crew.

Jack, tell us about your background before coming to WNC. "Having grown up on the flatlands of Nebraska, I loved going to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, only a 7 hour drive away. During a career as a Chemical Engineer, living in places like Louisiana and Florida, I was too far away from the mountains to really enjoy them. Then, I was transferred to Raleigh, NC and could visit the mountains more frequently. Upon retiring in 1993, Susan [Jack's beloved wife] and I headed straight for Hendersonville."

When did you join CMC? "We joined CMC in 1994. We joined at a time when one was required to participate in at least one trail maintenance event. I was hooked. I met a great bunch of people, experienced maintainers, hardworking, and very friendly. I have been doing trail maintenance every Friday, year round, for 20 years. It is hard, hot, dirty work that you couldn't pay me to do, but I love it. No one on our crew has ever suffered a real serious injury (safety is stressed!), nor have I heard anyone utter a cuss word (well, almost no one). There are a variety of jobs you can do, of your own choosing:

sawyers, rock movers, stump pullers, loppers, and dirt pushers (tread work) like me. We never run out of work, getting 93 miles of the AT ready for the thru-hikers in the spring, and lopping, weed eating, etc. year round on the MST and many other trails. The most fun is building new trails, as we have done extending the MST westward toward the Smokey Mountains, and in the Hickory Nut Gorge area around Bearwallow Mountain.” *Jack has logged 3460 hours of trail work and is renowned for his meticulous tread work. Of the 425 plus miles the Club maintains, I wager all of them have been touched by Jack’s hazel hoe.*

You are known as the “waterfall guru” and initiated the Waterfall Challenge for CMC. How did you develop such a passion for waterfalls? Do you have a favorite, and do you have any on your bucket list? “I believe waterfalls are so mesmerizing. Every waterfall is different, no two are alike, and the water flow is never the same, so the falls are like “new” every time I visit them. One of my favorites is Yellow Branch Falls, SC. Prior to initiating the CMC Waterfall Challenge; I had visited 272 waterfalls in WNC. This summer, Susan and I are traveling to Zimbabwe to witness first-hand the spectacular Victoria Falls.”

Jack, you are one of the few club members who have completed all of the CMC Challenges. Of the entire splinter hiking groups that have developed from CMC, your M&Mer’s have been around the longest. Share with us some of your hiking history. “In the past 21 years that I have lived in Hendersonville I have hiked over 9,500 miles, taking 1645 hikes. In addition to the United States, I have hiked in Canada, Costa Rica, Nepal, New Zealand, Switzerland, Finland, Peru, and Galapagos. I have led hiking trips for up to 20 people (mostly CMC members) to 13 National Parks. I still like to hike, although at a slower pace and far less distance than back in the 90’s. I like to lead a couple of CMC scheduled club hikes every year. Otherwise, I like to hike with a smaller group of friends at a slower pace and shorter distance than most CMC Wednesday and Sunday hikes. I like to take plenty of time to view the flowers, trees and bushes, listen to the sound of waterfalls, and just meditate. I hope to spend the rest of my life right here, continuing to enjoy the everlasting mountains.” *I find Jack to be an interesting juxtaposition: a true follower of leave-no-trace when it comes to the fauna; however his impact on individuals is indelible. Jack is an encyclopedic accordion, spilling his knowledge, love, enthusiasm, and lore with participants of his 100 organized hikes a year.*

So far, we know that you dedicate Monday, Wednesday and Friday to either hiking or trail maintenance. Are there other activities or interests that occupy your time? “I maintain a 3 mile section of trail for Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy. On Tuesdays I deliver for Meals on Wheels in Hendersonville. I also tutor for the Blue Ridge Literacy Council. We are active in our church and I am the Director for the “attic” which collects furniture for families in need. In the past I have also tutored in the Elementary school.”

Now I can ask you the reader the question: Do you know Jack?! He is a living WNC legend we are lucky enough to call our own. Jack is a leader, a dedicated volunteer, and a friend with a heart as big as the horizon of our blue mountains.