

Meet Don Walton (a.k.a. Buttons the Clown) Bobbi Powers - October 2010



There's nothing like a goofy headline to "hook" a reader. Now that you're hooked, read on to learn about the several "faces" of Don Walton, a man whose talents run the gamut from past president of CMC to being, yes indeed, a clown.

I recently met with Don at UNCA's Reuters Center after his class "History of the Chinese Communist Party," one of four classes Don is enrolled in this semester at NC Center for Creative Retirement.

Don's involvement with Carolina Mountain Club began in 1993 when he had to quit running and took up yoga and hiking. "The hiking stuck!" he says with a chuckle. Over the years the list of his accomplishments on behalf of the club has grown to an impressive number. His longest tenure was as CMC's MST Trail Supervisor for 15 years. Bob Johnson, the previous Supervisor, suggested the job to him, and even though Don had only a fuzzy idea of what the job entailed, he told Bob he would do it if Bob would give him his personalized MTS license plate (That was back in the days before the name change). Bob agreed, and the rest is history. Yes, Don did get a later plate that read MST.

In addition, Don has done many other jobs for the A.T. and the CMC – A.T. NC License Tag Committee member, A.T. Deep South Regional Partnership Committee Chairman, South Eastern Foothills Conference MST Representative, current member of the Board of Directors for the Friends of the Mountains to Sea Trail – and the list goes on and on.

Don is most proud of several programs he initiated which we CMCers take for granted today. Don designed and created the CMC website. He proposed the idea to the CMC board which could see no benefit from it. Keep in mind, this was in 1995-96 before most of us had email or had ever visited a website. But Don persisted, and finally one board member, a former IT guy, said, "For goodness sakes, just let him do it!" And Don did it – with no formal computer skills, virtually no money, and with some guidance from an ATC programmer. Don also started the eNews in 2003.

(Keep reading. There's more good stuff before we get to Buttons the Clown.)

During his tenure as CMC President 2002-2004 (He served 3 years because the person next in line could not take the job. Side note: Gerry McNabb served the other year.), Don accomplished what at the time was a most controversial action. He raised the dues from \$12 to \$20 per year. Membership has almost doubled since then. While Don wrestled with the duties of the presidency, he was at the same time maintaining the website and helping with the club's financial reports and doing his job as Coordinator for MST section maintainers.

Danny Bernstein says, “In my opinion, he was the most active CMC president since I’ve been with the club (9 years). He set a high bar for CMC presidents.”

Don is known for his love of and expertise with GPS. Over the past decade, Don has owned 6 GPS devices. In his years as a hike leader and trail maintainer, he has had to make four 911 calls. In the two calls involving hikers, Don says, “What made the difference between a good day and a bad day was a cell phone and a GPS.”

(Now let’s do some biographical background, and that’s where you’ll find Buttons.)

Don and his wife arrived in Asheville when Don took the job as Director of Financial Services at Grove Park Inn & Spa. He retired 16 years later in 2004. Don spent most of his career in the hospitality industry after a stint as Auditor for South Dakota after graduating from Huron College (Huron, SD) with a BA in Business Administration. Don had been drafted into the Navy and attended college on the GI Bill. During his career, Don held many prestigious offices with the international organization Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals (HFTP), including conference speaker, author, and culminating in serving as President during 2000-2001.



While working for GPI, Don trained as a clown, and was the official “clown host” at many GPI events. Can you picture Don wearing huge floppy scarlet shoes, a bulbous nose, prancing on a stage singing silly songs, and zany careening around a room full of well-heeled tourists?! Buttons the Clown still lives – in Don’s closet!

However, clowning around is not the only tidbit you may not have known about Don. He was part-owner of an airplane and was a private pilot for several years. He is also a skilled downhill snow skier.

Don’s skiing prowess segues into his hiking odysseys the past four years to Europe as part of the Four (or Three) Amigos. Master trip planner Tom Sanders signed up Don, Carroll Koeplinger, and Jay Bretz for four “once in a lifetime” hikes along the El Camino covering 1,200 miles in Spain, France, and Switzerland. Don rhapsodizes about each of these excursions, but especially loved staying with families during the 2009 trip to France and is still in awe of the “profound beauty of Switzerland” in 2010. The group is considering a 2011 trip to the western US to hike in national parks.

Now, back to skiing - Toward the end of the 2010 trip, en route to Geneva, the group met up with 2 Irish hikers who gushed about skiing a glacier. Don and Carroll found the area and spent a day there skiing while Jay hiked. This was no ordinary skiing experience. It was May. The weather was warm. The snow had melted. They were taken up to 11,000 ft. where a glacier’s snow had been groomed for skiing. They planned to ski from 9-2 pm, but had to stop at 1 pm due to a heavy snow storm. They turned a chance conversation into a memorable experience.

Don and his wife Jean, a retired special needs teacher/administrator, have been

married for 40 years and are the proud parents of two daughters, both of whom live in Asheville. His daughters were engaged 2 weeks apart, got married 2 weeks apart, and gave birth to baby boys – you guessed it – 2 weeks apart. There are now 6 grandchildren, ranging in age from 4 – 13. Don has taken the children geocaching at Bent Creek and at a state park in Myrtle Beach to woo them into the outdoors.

Don likes to be on the move, whether hiking, flying, or driving. He and Jean traveled 22,000 miles in September 2009 during a Jet Blue promotion allowing those who signed up to fly unlimited miles for 30 days. They made the most of this offer, touching down in Bermuda; Bogota, Colombia; California; Washington, DC; Las Vegas, and more. His latest “travel aid” is a 35’ Winnebago RV which already has 6,000 miles on it. Ten of twelve family members traveled in it to South Dakota this past summer for a family reunion. Don has also piloted the RV to Tulsa and to Myrtle Beach. With his GPS, his new iPad, and his Winnebago, we may be sure that Don’s traveling days are just shifting into high gear.