

Talking with Howard McDonald November 6, 2009

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It's not easy to find a picture of Howard McDonald standing still.

That's Howard in the foreground, with a blue hat.



Howard has been CMC Trail Facilities Manager since 2007, a new position that he created because "I like to design and build things." Roaring Fork Shelter, bridge on the MST, bear cables at A.T. shelter; the list goes on.

Howard grew up outside of Los Angeles. He spent much of his working life in Washington State, as a ceramic engineer. He and his wife camped and hiked in the western mountains. He worked in R/D and designed equipment. "I don't hesitate. I design, build, and solve problems."

Howard was transferred in 1981 from St. Louis to the Blue Ridge and he and his wife settled in Hendersonville. "The growth here in the Hendersonville area has changed the area for the better." He retired in 1990. When his wife died the next year, he took a road trip and scattered her ashes in Mt. Rainier National Park. "Then I sent a letter to Sierra Club and CMC," he said. "I never got a reply from Sierra Club so I joined CMC in 1992."

At the time, Bob Johnson had the Friday crew in Hendersonville. CMC had instituted a rule that all potential members had to go on two hikes and one maintenance activity. [That lasted 2 to 3 years and was abandoned at the end of 1994.] "I went with Bob and I was hooked."

Howard also went on hikes to begin with. But he soon gravitated to maintenance as he got more involved in CMC.

"Maintenance uses different muscles. The crew doesn't hike much – most of the time you're right there at the work spot but you could be carrying 45 lbs. including chain saws, fuel, and other equipment." Howard got on the CMC council in 1995 and became president in 1998 as well as the A.T. supervisor the same year. "For the A.T. job, I was told that the only thing I had to do is to turn in a yearly report. Hah!!"

When he was asked to become Vice President, he was told "All you have to do is to plan the annual dinner." At this time, he remembers that there were no committees and two trail crews, - a western MST crew from Pisgah West, and an eastern MST crew to Mt. Mitchell and the A.T.

Now he doesn't hike much because he's busy with maintenance work. "We hike to get where we need to maintain." He was A.T. trail supervisor until 2008 when he passed the responsibility to Don Walton. He's 83 years old.

Howard led an effort to install bear cables on CMC's section of the A.T. "We had a bear problem in 2007 on the A.T. I looked at the bear cable arrangement in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But the park limits the number of people at their backcountry sites. We don't do that on the A.T." So Howard used a thicker cable. The money came from A.T. license plate money. If you look at Howard's building specifications for bear cables at [arialfoodstorage.pdf](#), you'll appreciate the precision with which he works.



Howard is also member of the Friday Crew. There he's a grunt (his word). Now the crew is working on the MST, close to Waterrock Knob, where it's been flagged. "You do the middle of the trail first, then the

ends as you finish." But it's been rough lately since it's rained so much.

He explains that the "Saturday work crew builds trail thread. The weekday crew prepares the new MST section with heavy work and special equipment, so they can bring in new people on the Saturday workdays. Building thread is the easiest thing to teach."

He's also worked on High Rocks on the A.T. "Originally we wanted to relocate the trail but it's a tough section. The Konnarock crew couldn't relocate the trail so they rehabilitated it. We also improved the side trail. But there was lots of rain."

And future maintenance plans?

"High Rocks is almost done. We need to move some privies to new spots." When the privies all become moldering privies, he hopes to never have to move privies. Howard devised a moldering privy system by modifying a system that the Green Mountain Club in Vermont had.

"With all the rocks in the Northeast, they do the moldering above ground but we can dig holes since we have soil. Ultimately each privy will have three 11 foot holes. We have 10 shelters and 10 privies. Each time we need to move a privy, we need USFS permission and that takes a long time. So hopefully by next year (2010), all the privies will be the moldering kind."

"We need a history of maintenance. We need to keep track of when we relocate a trail, build a shelter, and move a privy. If we don't write it down, it will disappear from people's memory."

I felt I wasn't getting the real Howard with all this emphasis about maintenance, bear cables, and moldering privies but that's how he sees himself. "It's me. I love to build things."

One of his sons gave him a book on how to build a pool table and Howard did. When he and his crew planned the Roaring Fork Shelter, they had to take out a cherry tree and now Howard has a cherry tree pool table where he plays pool regularly. "Pretty neat!" Howard smiles.

CMC recognized Howard for all his trail work accomplishments by making him an honorary life member in 2006. CMC is the only organization he's active in. Thanks to whoever in CMC answered Howard's letter in 1992.