

Interview with Skip Sheldon

By Stuart English

Skip Sheldon has made his mark in Trail Maintenance since he first joined the Asheville Crew in 1998. He became a Crew Leader in 2011. According to Jim Ariail, “if we can’t lift something on the trail, it is always ‘where is Skip?’ I think everyone likes him and appreciates him as a crew leader.” Recently Skip won the Distinguished Service Award for consistent and extraordinary contributions to the club during the years of membership. Recently we contacted Skip and gathered some information to share with all those who may not know a lot about trail maintainers.

What led you to become interested in Trail Maintenance?

I have been interested and involved in outdoor activities my whole life. Boy Scouts added to that interest including introducing me to the Appalachian Trail while working with a Scout troop in Wilmington Delaware. This interest in trails and hiking continued when I came to Hendersonville, and I took my Scout troop on many long distance hiking trips including some on the AT. In 1992 I learned about the Konarock trail maintenance crew program through the ATC and applied to work with them for a week that summer. I enjoyed the trail work very much and returned to Konarock for the next 10 years. When I retired, I looked around for a trail crew to join, and someone gave me Howard McDonald’s name. I called him, and soon found myself part of the Asheville Friday trail crew. As my trail maintenance time increased, my hiking time dwindled, so now maintenance is about all that I do.

How did you evolve into crew leader after years of being a crew member?

When I started on the crew, Phil Smith was the leader of all the CMC crews (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). When he passed away suddenly, we were tossed into a leadership panic and had to regroup quickly. Several of us got together to address this problem, and the decision was made to split into 3 separate crews (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) with a different leader for each. The Friday crew was the largest, with the most complicated work schedule, and nobody was very interested in taking over as its leader. With some prodding, Piet Bodenhorst and I agreed to share the leadership duties. We took turns doing the scheduling and other weekly crew leader duties and Piet did most of the CMC and agency partner contact work. This arrangement worked fine, until about 3 years ago, when Piet decided that he wanted to downsize not only his home, but other commitments as well, and stepped back from crew leadership. I have been the solo crew leader since then, but am working on breaking in some new folks so they are experienced and ready to go when I pull a "Piet" in a couple of years.

What were some of your biggest challenges in Maintenance?

For leading the crew itself, the biggest challenge is to find the right work each week. We usually have 15-20 folks show up to work with us each week, who range in skills from brand new to extremely experienced, and range in age from 20+ (sometimes) to almost 90. The trail work I schedule has to give all of them work to do that is within their ability level and something that they will enjoy, so they keep coming back. Within the crew, we have the skills and experience to do any trail job that comes along, but many of the jobs that need to be done (clearing 1 or 2 down trees on a trail section, for example) don't provide enough work to keep everyone busy, so I can't schedule them. This is even true sometimes when building a new trail that require special skills, like building long sections of rock tread. That work is beyond the ability or interest of some of the crew, but they still want to come out with the crew, so there

needs to be something for them to do. Facilities work, like installing a new privy or building a picnic table can also present this problem. We sometimes split the crew in these cases, but then you have to worry about transportation to several different places, and so on. Keeping enough folks certified to do the special jobs like sawing or weed whacking can also present problems. Building and maintaining the trails themselves is the easy part of the job. We sometimes get into very interesting trail problems, but that just makes solving them more fun, and with our folks, I know that we have the talent needed to complete the job.

Tell us about your life before CMC.

I was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. I was active in the Boy Scouts while growing up and earned the Eagle rank. One of the biggest adventures from my time in Minnesota was spending the summer of 1963 in Alaska working for the state highway department. We lived in a fly-in tent camp and had to carry guns with us each day because of the bears in the area.

I earned a BS in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Minnesota in 1966 and a MS in Engineering Administration from the University of Tennessee in 1976.

I went to work for the DuPont Company right out of college. My first assignment was with the Development Department in Wilmington Delaware, where I helped develop new building products. One of those products that is still being sold is Corian counter top material. I transferred to The Brevard Plant (now the DuPont State Forest) in 1970 and worked in assignments including production supervision, maintenance, and process engineering until I retired in 1998. A large part of my career was spent developing, building, and bringing on line the production equipment for the finishing of X-Ray film. I hold two US patents on this equipment.

I met and married my wife (Phyllis) in Delaware. We have two adult sons, who are both living with their families in Raleigh, NC. We have four grandchildren. Phyllis and I have had the good fortune to do a considerable amount of

traveling for pleasure and have visited over 30 different countries.

What are some other interests you have?

I have been involved in a number of activities besides trail work. This includes working with the Boy Scouts for over 50 years. I served as a Scoutmaster for over 15 years in both Delaware and Hendersonville and worked in a number of training and leadership positions since then. I am now a member of the Scout Council Endowment Committee and the Executive Board. I served as the fund raising chairman and Chapter President for the Henderson County Heart Association; member and Chairman of the Henderson County Junior Crime Prevention Commission; Counselor and Chapter President for SCORE (a volunteer organization that provides counseling to small businesses); served on the Board of Directors of the Henderson County YMCA; and was major project chairman, Treasurer, Executive Board member, and President of the Pisgah Chapter of Trout Unlimited. I am a Community Ambassador for Blue Ridge Community College and taught classes at Brevard College for a couple of years. After I retired, I established a small consulting company to complete the work underway when I left DuPont. I work with my church as chairman of the Finance Committee and a member of the Executive Board. In the spare time I have left, I love to fly fish for trout and hunt Ruffed Grouse.

What are the club's biggest challenges in the future involving Trail Maintenance?

I believe the biggest challenge will be working with our agency partners within the government and non-profit systems. This is becoming very complex. The old days of just going out and building good trail are gone. In their place we have memorandums of understanding, partnership agreements, and many, many rules and regulations that must be followed. All of these are important

and necessary in some cases and some places, but most of them have been developed to cover a very wide span of situations, which frequently don't apply to volunteer trail maintenance. An example is; having to make special designs for shelters and privies so they are "handicapped accessible" to accommodate folks, who may be "handicapped", but have hiked 10-20 miles over sometimes very rough trails to get to them.