



Meet John Whitehouse . A Leader by Example

By . Ann Hendrickson

I have the good fortune of having John as my Section Maintenance Supervisor, and sitting on the Trail Maintenance Committee with him. Some CMC members may not have yet met John. If one hikes at all in the Black Mountains, undoubtedly they are witness to John's (personal) 2,000 hours of trail maintenance, and the carefully monitored work done on 19 MST sections. It is my pleasure to share a bit of John's background.

Please tell us about your getting involved with the CMC trail crew. I know that you are a Section Maintainer, Section Leader, and the Monday Crew leader...how did all of this evolve? How many hours a month do you average on CMC maintenance?

I joined CMC while still living in SC. My wife Sandy and I had decided to retire to the Asheville area and we purchased land in Yancey County and started building a house. In late 2005 I took one of the CMC sponsored chainsaw certification classes. In February 2006 I joined John Soldati's Wednesday Crew. The first day out John asked me to saw. He and I played "leap-frog" sawing downed trees on the AT between Hurricane Gap and Allen Gap. It was windy and cold but I loved it! A few years later my teaching schedule made it difficult to go out Wednesdays so I joined Barth Brooker's Monday Crew. Both John and Barth were excellent mentors for me. Besides learning about trail work I was also introduced to dozens of trails I would never have found on my own. Trail work is my exercise program, my "gym". I average about 35 hours per month on CMC activities.

Another great aspect of the crews is the many interesting people you meet. I've learned so much from folks like Jorge Munoz, Don Christensen, Dave Roberts, and many others. As Barth taught me the crew objectives are (1) have fun, (2) enjoy socializing and (3) get some work done!

I became a Section Maintainer about eight years ago thanks to Don Walton. I had noticed that the Big Butt trail, which is only ten minutes from my house, did not have a SM. I approached Don and he cleverly made me an offer. He'd let me and my wife become Section Maintainers on this trail IF we agreed to take

the MST section from Black Mountain Campground to Higgins Bald. He was having trouble finding someone to do this section so we agreed. Big Butt trail, from the BRP (at Walker Knob Overlook) to Cane River Gap on NC 197, is my favorite trail. It has incredible wildflowers and a fantastic view of the Black Mountains from Little Butt. We hike it several times a year and do our best, with the help of crew members, to keep it clear.

Please describe how you see your role as a Section Leader. What is the most frustrating part of this "job"? What is the most rewarding? How long have you been in this position? How many MST Section Maintainers report to you? Is there high turnover with Section Maintainers? Do you have to train Section Maintainers? How do you recruit new ones?

Barth asked me to take over the MST Section Leader position in late 2013. There are 19 sections from the Folk Art Center to Black Mountain Campground with one to three maintainers for each. By and large we have a great group of maintainers on these sections of the MST with very little turnover. I've been able to fill vacancies fairly easily. I've been particularly impressed with Rocko Smucker's work on his section from Rich Knob to Potato Field Gap. He put more than 500 hours into trail maintenance in 2014! The majority of these hours were on his section. It has been a pleasure to get to know the maintainers and to work with them on projects with the Monday Crew.

There are several different CMC Maintenance crews, tell us about the Monday crew, how many crew members? How long has the crew been together? What trails does this crew focus on? Are you recruiting new members?

The Monday Crew has been around for a long time. Barth led the crew before he asked me to take over. We are a smaller crew with typically six to ten folks out on any given work day. Most of our members are based out of Burnsville so we tend to work the northern side of the area covered by CMC. This includes the AT from Devil's Fork Gap to Spivey Gap and the MST from the Folk Art Center to Black Mountain Campground. We do have a number of Asheville members and welcome new recruits. Besides the AT and MST we focus on Forest Service trails in the Appalachian Ranger District (ARD) including Douglas Falls, Shelton Laurel trails, and trails on the Black Mountains. Of course some of the other CMC crews work these trails as well so I try to coordinate our efforts to prevent duplication.

A few years ago a number of CMC members in the Burnsville area formed the NC High Peaks Trail Association to develop and promote trails in Yancey County. We are a separate 501c(3) organization. I lead a monthly trail crew for High Peaks which allows us to focus on trails outside the normal CMC range. Our organization does virtually all the trail work on the Black Mountain Crest Trail (outside Mt. Mitchell SP) and the numerous feeder trails. We have also taken responsibility for an MST section between Black Mountain Campground to NC 80. High Peaks is not in competition with CMC in any way. We feel we are a junior partner promoting and caring for trails in an area adjacent to that traditionally maintained by CMC. High Peaks is also the official Friends of Mount Mitchell SP organization. I've enjoyed working with the rangers at the state park on several projects. Currently we are installing a new webcam near the summit. CMC financed the original webcam which has been out of action for several years.

John, a lot of people assume that people "retire" from hiking to take on a section of trail to maintain. Are you an active hiker now? Do you have a favorite trail?

I actually got interested in trail work before becoming an active hiker. My wife and I participate in local hikes and hike a lot on our own. I have led some hikes for CMC in the Black Mountains and hope to do so again. Leading hikes has shown me how much work and responsibility is placed on the hike leader. It is not unlike what crew leaders deal with.

I've already mentioned Big Butt as my favorite trail but a close second is the Black Mountain Crest Trail. The seclusion and sense of remoteness on the trail really attract me. The section from Winter Star Mountain north to Celo Knob is particularly beautiful and less hiked than the section in the state park.

A lot of people are "transplants" or "migrants" to the mountains. Can you please tell us what you did for "pay" prior to your committing to all your CMC duties? How did we get so lucky to have you a) join the club) and b) make such a tremendous commitment to serve? Besides CMC, do you have other passions?

I am a retired nuclear engineer. I spent 30 plus years in the civilian nuclear power and government nuclear weapons industries. The work was fascinating and challenging. My last full-time job was at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. Towards the end of that career we started looking for mountain land/home in western NC and eastern TN. We really like Yancey County. Our home sits at nearly 4000 feet with a clear view of the Blacks from Deep Gap to Mount Mitchell. To keep my brain active I teach math and physical science as a part-time adjunct professor at Mars Hill University. When we have a little time we travel.

If there is one recommendation or suggestion you could make to CMC club members what would that be?

Take a hike! Get outside as much as you can. If you feel physically able try working on a CMC maintenance crew!

