

LONG TRAIL

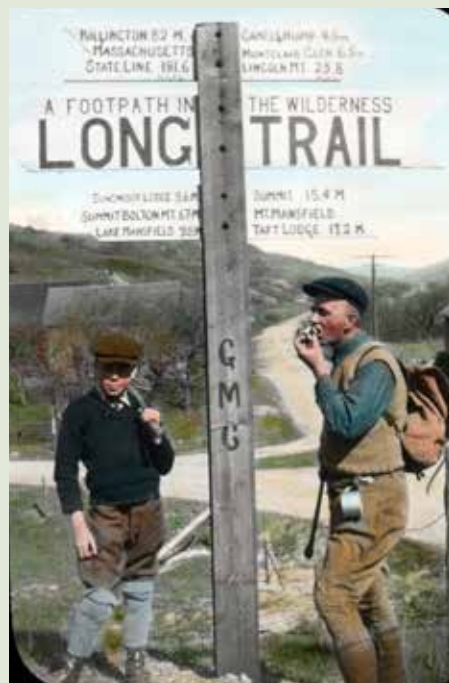
A FOOTPATH IN THE WILDERNESS

You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer.

—FRANK ZAPPA

I always wanted to start a story with this quote. A possible corollary to Zappa is, you can't be a real hiking trail without trail signs.

Growing up in southern New England there indeed were trails without signs. Some of those trails are now National Scenic Trails. (Hint: the Appalachian Trail was one of them.) Generally, well-made trail signs seem



to be an expression of organizational energy and, perhaps more importantly, skill and craftsmanship. Above all, signs should add to the trail experience.

Whenever my family visited the North Country, trail signs greeted us and pointed the way to the next adventure. The White Mountains had a curious mix of National Forest, Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) and Randolph Mountain Club signs. The AMC's brown-painted wooden signs with bright yellow lettering stood out for not revealing trail distances; I've since learned that there is wisdom in avoiding numbers, because in the woods, nothing is exact.

From the start of the Long Trail construction in 1910 until the 1930s LT signs were hand-painted with just enough information to guide the hiker. The 1922 *Long Trail Guidebook* reads: "The Long Trail has been built in sections, largely by local enthusiasts who have given time and money to put it through, and various systems of marking have been used, so they are not always uniform."

The Long Trail then traversed a more diverse mosaic of public and private lands than it does now, which also fostered diversity in signage. One of the first color illustrations in the 1922 guidebook classified trail markers other than the white painted blazes still used today: red discs, white discs, red and white discs, red metal arrows, white metal or wood arrows, white lettered arrows designating direction and distance and red signs with white lettering.

It's likely that GMC's desire to publicize the new trail led to the prominent white crossroads signs that stood out for hikers traveling by in that new contraption, the automobile. Old photos show large arrow-shaped signs on wooden posts with "Long Trail, a footpath in the wilderness" in conspicuous black painted letters. Smaller arrows on the post pointed toward nearby towns and trail landmarks. "Massachusetts State Line 181.6 miles." "Taft Lodge 17.2 m."

I've seen photos of downtown Bolton

and remote Brandon Gap showing signs from the 1920s. The landscape and buildings in the background have changed so much that a game can be made of figuring out the sign's location by the destinations and distances listed.

Around the 1930s, hand-painted signs yielded to signs carved with routers. My theory is that the shift was inspired by the rustic architecture that accompanied the birth and growth of national parks and forests. The Green Mountain National Forest was established in 1932 and large brown routed signs soon appeared on the Long Trail. (Log shelters built by the Civilian Conservation Corps appeared soon thereafter; Old Job and Peru Peak Shelters are still with us.) Today the national forest is quietly changing to routed signs of unpainted western cedar, and state forests are installing lightly stained spruce and pine signs.

There doesn't seem to be a well-documented history of early sign makers but we can assume they, like nearly all GMC folk, were volunteer trail enthusiasts. Trail sign makers today are still volunteers who are generous with their time and skills. While GMC does have guidelines, one could say each sign maker has, or had, their own style, one of the Long Trail's many charms.

In the 1960s, **Herb Ogden Sr.** of Hartland routed beautiful brown painted signs on oak boards with impeccable white lettering detailing distances to multiple destinations and noting elevation. A couple are still out there on the trail today. One of his Pico



Herb Ogden Sr. Signs

Junction signs hangs in mint condition in the stairwell of the Inn at Long Trail. Mr. Ogden's signs led hikers through the Killington section, along the Vermont Appalachian Trail leading eastward to Hanover, and up the trails on Mount Ascutney. A few of his signs ranged further afield—we have one in the club's collection from Montclair Glen Lodge on Camel's Hump.

Don Whitney of Springfield contributed more than a few beautiful signs to the Vermont AT as the trail moved away from roads in the 1980s and 1990s, beginning with methods learned from Herb Ogden Sr. An engineer, Don developed ways to speed his work, including jigs and fixtures for straight lines, and templates for curved letters and numbers. He switched from the painted spruce he used at first (he couldn't find oak) to unpainted pressure-treated wood, and from tracing characters from stencils to composing signs on a computer. He also made a few signs for the Long Trail, many for trails on Mount Ascutney, and some for trails in Norwich.



Don Hill Sign

The recently departed **Don Hill** of St. Albans, made unique signs for the northern Long Trail employing very small letters that reflected his penchant for precision and a long love of the northern reaches of the trail. His signs are easy to spot because he mounted them on brackets so that as the tree grew, the bolts would not pull through and damage the sign. Don not only made signs but contributed mightily to the maps of the *Long Trail Guide* printings of the 1990s.

Former state senator **Bill Carris** of Rutland contributed many unpainted, pressure-treated wooden signs to the Long Trail/Appalachian Trail in the 1990s when the old trail signs started to fail or disappear.



Bob Lindemann Sign

Sterling Section member **Bob Lindemann's** signs are recognizable by their precision and slightly slanted lettering. His signs can still be found on the trail today at Hagerman's Overlook north of Sterling Pond and pointing the way to Whiteface Shelter.

Three other sign makers have filled in where needed in the past ten or fifteen years. The late **Al Fiebig** of Waterbury crafted block-lettered signs, and moved us away from the old standard of dark board with light letters to light board with darkened letters. **Cat Eich** of Waterbury spent long hours in the GMC field barns routing signs in between her AT thru-hikes. And 1970s summit ranger naturalist and caretaker (also current Trail Management Committee member) **Howard VanBenthuyzen** of Hyde Park has recently produced many signs for the Long Trail. Howard's signs have distinctive curved ends and a polyurethane finish.

A few summers ago GMC employed Long Trail Patrol member **Sam Schlep-phorst** as a part-time sign maker after he badly broke his leg skiing. Sam spent the summer learning the craft and helped with a GMC sign-routing workshop in 2012.

Our agency partners have contributed some distinctive signs, too. **Ken Norden** of the Green Mountain National Forest has made signs for the Long Trail in federal wilderness areas for years. Seasonal employees of the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation have made signs for Camel's Hump and Mount Mansfield since before my time at the club. **Shane Prisby** has made more than a few, and **Tom Simmons**, now retired, deserves special mention for his work on northern and southern Long Trail terminus signs that hikers pass today.

I tip GMC's collective cap to Long Trail sign makers past and present, and welcome new ones. There is a learning curve but enthusiasm, patience and safe working practices are really the only prerequisites.

I Have a Friend Who Works on Mountain Trails; his particular passion is putting up signs telling hikers where they are now, how far they have yet to go, arrows to tell them where to turn and blazes to keep them on the trail.

At a meeting of fellow trail workers when someone tells of hikers getting lost because they didn't see his handiwork he pounds the table and recites his mantra, "they don't see because they don't look."

I've taken my friend aside and explained that some people don't see because they watch carefully where they step, others perhaps because they look at the scenery, or are involved in a good conversation.

He listens and being a not unreasonable man mumbles "you may be right," but then, like a child reluctant to give up a favorite thumb, mutters, "do you suppose if we painted a yellow line down the middle of the trail...?"

—DON HILL



L-R: Howard VanBenthuyzen and Attorney General William Sorrell

We and our land managing partners need to review sign content and agree on it before production. We try hard to harmonize distances posted on signs with those published in GMC's *Long Trail Guide*, and with field information collected over the decades, but "exact" continues to elude us.

If you have photographs of old Long Trail or Vermont Appalachian Trail signs or historical information about signs or sign makers, we encourage you to share them with us. And may a sign or two appear on your next hike when you need them most.

—DAVE HARDY

DIRECTOR OF TRAIL PROGRAMS