

“The Best Hike Ever”
or
A Walk with Walt (and Susan)

“Afoot and lighthearted I take to the open road...” Walt Whitman begins *Song of the Open Road*. So, too, on a sunny Saturday in October do a dozen Appalachian Mountain Club hikers begin their 9-mile trek: ready to walk and in particularly good humor on this archetypical autumn day. In total, this hike includes 7 trails, 6 bridges, 5 bathrooms, 4 lakes, 3 mountains, 2 forts, and 1 zoo – and 2,400 feet of elevation gain. Testimony that we sensed a good hike: one-third of the participants are leaders with 7-year hike leader Susan Pollak guiding the way and prolific hike leader Art Almeida as sweep.



Beginning at the Bear Mountain Inn built in 1915 whose architecture is National Park lodge style, we learn that Bear Mountain State Park was established in 1908 and has been maintained since then by the Palisades Interstate Park Commission; many structures within the Park, including Perkins Tower, were constructed by the Civil Conservation Corps. Our initial steps bring us past Hessian Lake – the name stemming from the German mercenaries who fought for the British here during the Revolutionary War. As our first trail is along the 2,179 mile Appalachian Trail, immediately we all acknowledge that we are now bona fide “AT section hikers.” And we share the gratitude that its lowest elevation of 124 feet is right here at Bear Mountain – and not its high point! The AT leads us into the zoo, where yes, there are bears to see on this hike, along with foxes, owls, otters, porcupine, and even an eagle. Here we meet the larger-than-life, statuesque Walt Whitman and find inscribed in the adjacent boulder a stanza from his free-verse poems in *Leaves of Grass*:

“Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.”

And then my favorite line in all of poetry:

“Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,”

Walt continues:

“Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.”

Then as if with wedding vows:

“Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?”

And for this day, we pledge to share of ourselves; to travel this path of history, nature and literature; and to stick by each other – nature lovers one and all.

This is also the location of Fort Clinton; we discover only remnants of its foundation. We pass beneath the Bear Mountain Bridge which was the first span across the Hudson River in 1924, and while it no longer holds the record as the world's longest suspension bridge, it continues to be the longest bridge crossing along the entire Appalachian Trail. After strolling across the most sturdy of all footbridges (see photo), our group inspects Fort Montgomery – replete with museum, maps, and even a movie on the battle fought here featuring the heroics of Anthony Wayne and patriots.

Popolopen Torne is our first major climb of the day, and we are rewarded with a memorial cairn built by the cadets of the nearby U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and a Hudson River Valley panorama. Here with a 360 degree perspective, I see the words of Whitman: "I inhale great draughts of space; the east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine." Here, I understand his words: "From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines." for atop Popolopen are absent paved highways with their double yellow lines, the bottom-line of the workday, the early morning punch-clock line, the dotted line of the co-op agreement, and all other contracts and social constructs.

The trail follows scenic Popolopen Creek which requires several footbridge crossings, and leads to an idyllic lunch respite at Queensboro Lake. From there, we soon reach Turkey Hill Lake signaling we are in the homestretch, and begin our ascent up Long Mountain..

The final trail junction is the 347-mile Long Path – extending from Fort Lee to Albany – which was championed by Raymond Torrey: visionary of the Long Path, author of the New York Evening Post columns *The Long Brown Path* and also *Outings*, and founding member of the NY-NJ Trail Conference. A memorial was etched into the rock here atop Long Mountain – his favorite viewpoint in all of Harriman State Park.

Here at the Torrey Memorial, terminus of our 9-mile trek, a surprise awaits us – ice cream! Susan had managed to stow several cartons of the Turkey Hill brand on ice before our hike in order to greet us upon completion of our journey. In celebration, we initiate a new tradition: "leader tossing" featuring first victim Hallie Wolfe (see attached photograph).

As we enjoy our frosty treat, Susan asks: what are our favorite verses of Walt Whitman? Art Almeida volunteers his: "I have learned that to

be with those I like is enough" – which is certainly true of our hike today. Art actually has led an AMC hike which he entitled "The Best Hike Ever." Testimony of what a phenomenal hike this is, after reciting Whitman and polishing off his ice cream (and tossing Hallie to Turkey Hill Lake below), Art exclaims, "This is the best hike ever!"

Often when I read about an event in the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, I am disappointed that it is in the past tense and I have lost my opportunity to participate. If imitation is the finest form of flattery, then Susan Pollak shall be delighted that I am reprising her route on August 10, which I entitle 7-6-5-4-3-2-1. And I promise it shall be: The Best Hike Ever!

