

Dr. Alan S. Thorndike

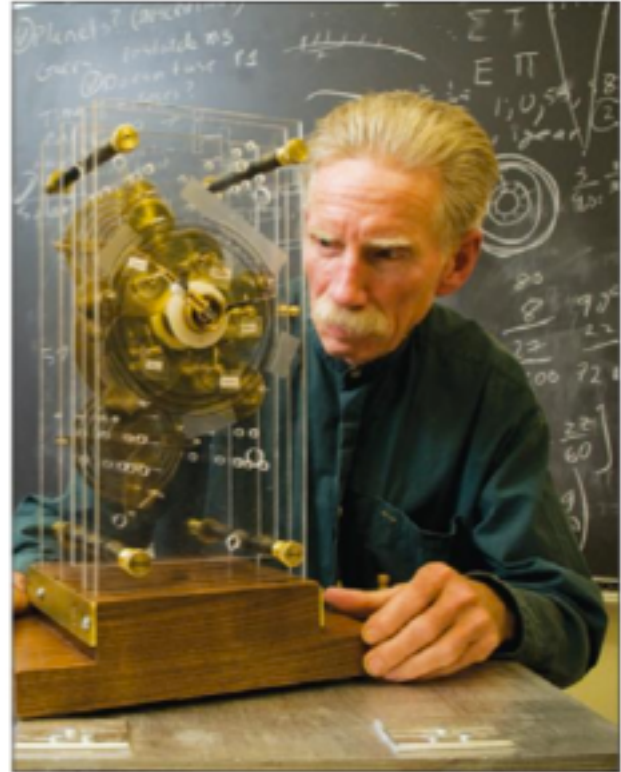
Al Thorndike (Trail Crew 1963-66, TM 1965-66) died January 8, 2018 after a short bout with pneumonia. He was 72. He suffered from Parkinson's disease for 30 years; however, this hardly slowed him. He put more than 11,000 miles on his recumbent bicycle during his last two years of life in Maryland.

Alan was my Trail Master. I joined the crew in 1965, a greenhorn who jumped in feet first, totally enthusiastic. Three years older than me, he became like my big brother and nicknamed me "Bobe" (pronounced 'BOE-be') after the character Bobby Watson from Eugene Ionesco's theater of the absurd play *The Bald Soprano*... never knew why he picked that name, even 50 years later (when we talked about it)! But it stuck: at the end of that summer, all 11 other members of the 1965 Trail Crew thought my name was Bobby Watson! We worked for Trails Supervisor Joe May and chief cook and house mother Sally May in Whitefield, N.H. It was an important and innovative time for Trail Crew.

Joe and others describe how those mid-1960's crews started to discern new trail hardening techniques, two of which Alan helped invent, bog bridging or "puncheon" as it was later called by the Forest Service, first installed through "the giant puddles" on the Webster Cliff Trail, and heavy duty rock work on the Mizpah Cut-off in 1965, the year the new Mizpah Hut was opened, which we later named rock boxes or cribs. (See two paragraphs in *One Hundred Summers*, p. 109, by Joe May and Mark Dannenhauer).

Joe now recalls that Alan always urged him to let the crew create and discover new ways to build and maintain trails, shelters, and other matters, including tool maintenance. While I don't think Al knew it then, they were both passionate teachers, and we're in many ways joined at the hip.

Alan wrote the introduction to *One Hundred Summers*, p. 1, which authors Natalie Beittel & Kyle Peckham snagged from Thorndike's "Trail Crew Thoughts" published



Alan with the model of the Antikythera mechanism, an ancient Greek analogue computer, that he constructed.
Photo by Ross Mulhausen

in *Appalachia*, Volume 32, December 1965, and reprinted in the 2017 issue of TC's *Chips & Clippings*.

In that seminal piece, Alan named the Trail Crew “Caretakers of the Great Compromise” (my emphasis): The TFC as maintainers upholding the balance that prevents damage to the land, on the one hand, while providing safe access dispersing visitors to remote mountains, ridges and lakes on the other. Thus, Thorndike in many respects was the Trail Master who ushered in trails conservation during the burgeoning 1970s when thousands of hikers first hit the Whites.

With a family full of physicists, Alan did not want to follow their footsteps. As an avid hiker, distance runner, mountaineer and alpinist, he decided on geophysics, and got his PhD from the University of Washington in 1978. Thereafter, Alan was one of the early scientists studying the Arctic sea ice and climate change. At the age of 29, he was named Chief Scientist on the ice for the Arctic Ice Dynamics Joint Experiment and was one of the founding members of what is now the Polar Science Center at the University of Washington. Alan is credited with developing the notion of the thickness of the sea ice as a variable, a concept that is at the heart of most sea ice models used today. While on the ice, Alan was crucial to the scientific planning and field execution, and told me once of being stalked by a polar bear. As it happened, leading the “field execution” included rescuing a colleague who slipped down a snow slope and directing the evacuation of the main Big Bear camp when the runway broke up in October 1975. As on Trail Crew, Alan was an early master discerning and measuring the dynamics of global climate change.

While it took some years, Alan’s professional passion finally emerged, teaching. He joined the faculty at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington in 1983, after his time as a geophysicist. At UPS, he became the second University Professor of the Natural Sciences and was awarded emeritus status as a Professor of Physics upon his retirement in 2012. Alan checked all of the boxes as a member of the academy: publishing papers in peer reviewed journals, chairing his department, serving on faculty and board committees, and organizing academic programming such as the Max Planck Symposium, which he hosted in honor of the 100th anniversary of the quantum.

But he was most proud of his contributions as a teacher, often enabled by his skilled craftsmanship of wood and metal. He loved to recreate famous physics experiments, such as the Zeeman effect, with students in his lab. He innovated with teaching both within his department (at one point attempting to teach electromagnetism “backwards”) and across disciplines (including courses on the Origins of Life and climate modeling). He designed the multi-story Foucault pendulum that hangs in the university’s Harned Hall and built the Pemrose tiling that lies beneath it. But his crowning achievement at the intersection of physics and craftsmanship was the model he built, based on the conceptual theories of his colleague, Jim Evans, of the Antikythera Mechanism — a 2,200 year old device, which went undiscovered for 1,900 years, that has been labeled the world’s first computer and is believed to

model the movement of celestial bodies. (See picture and look it up in your favorite search engine; it's worth the read.)



Avid lifelong sailor, distance runner (and later biker), trail master, geophysicist, musician, carpenter, professor, loving husband, father and grandfather, Alan died peacefully and, in the words of his younger brother Karl (TC 1967-69), “saved him and his family from the hideous endgame of Parkinson’s. He lived with this disease far longer than expected and through his strong will managed to do so many of the things he enjoyed for so long.”

Alan marching for science with colleague near his home in Oxford, Maryland (Photo by Louise Thorndike)

Bobe

Bob Proudman, TCA Convener & Secretary, with aid from the obituary written by Alan’s and Louise’s son, John Thorndike.