TRAIL CREW THOUGHTS

by Alan S. Thorndike

One must inevitably compromise when considering how to preserve the White Mountain area. It will accommodate thousands of hikers during a week. No party need be aware of another's presence, and the wilderness is still available—raw and quite tangible—to all. Unfortunately, the presence of thousands of persons introduces problems. They get lost and injured, chop down live trees, peel bark, and discard paper, tinfoil, and tin cans throughout the woods. For these reasons the pure conservationists would argue (and have argued) that no new huts or shelters should be built, no new trails cut, and only persons knowledgeable in the techniques and courtesies of wilderness living be allowed in the woods. But such a policy fails to offer the beauty of the forests and the hills to those who need it most—precisely, those who have not seen and do not know that beauty.

The A.M.C. trail system is a compromise designed to allow safe travel in the wilderness for even the uninitiated, while at the same time displaying the rugged woods and hills of this area. The A.M.C. has for some time supported a crew to maintain this trail system.

The trail crew in its present form is a group of ten to fifteen men ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-one. The crew is stationed in Whitefield, and operates under the able supervision of Joe May, who teaches school in Littleton during his winter vacation from trail work. We are college students or high school seniors. Our academic interests vary from forestry to mathematics and social sciences. We spend our classroom hours dreaming of high mountains. Our fingers yearn to put aside the pencil and take up the ax.

It is our responsibility to maintain 300 miles of trails, which includes a ninety-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail from Kinsman Notch to Andover, Maine. In addition, we have eighteen shelters (leantos where nothing but shelter is provided for the hiker) to keep up.

Trail maintenance is as yet no science. Winter storms provide us with several glorious weeks of ax work, clearing our trails of blown down trees. And, alas, in the low areas brush grows so fast that we can scarcely leave a trail for a year before it is

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closed in again. Our aim is to have all trails cut free of downed trees and brush to three feet on either side of the treadway and to eight feet high. Further, in any places where there is confusion, such as wide open woods, ledges, and above the timberline, the trail must be clearly blazed. We also try to establish a dry and relatively comfortable treadway. Finally, we must hang signs at all trail junctions to eliminate confusion.

Our basic tools are axes, saws, clippers, and sundry brush-cutting tools for clearing. For marking confusing places we use paint (sparingly), ax blazes, rock cairns, and occasional signs. To construct a dry treadway through a muddy area, we utilize the rocks and trees available. These, together with strong backs and some imagination, have restored the Mizpah Cut-off and Webster Cliff Trail to usable condition.

A word about shelters is in order. Many of our shelters were built during the '30s by the CCC. Now, in the '60s, they need replacements. This work consumes much of each summer. We have recently replaced Eliza Brook, Kinsman Pond, and Mizpah Spring shelters. (Mizpah Spring shelter has been relocated on the east side of Mt. Jackson, and renamed Naumann Shelters; there are two ten-man shelters.) We expect and enjoy this sort of shelter work, but it seems unnecessary to have to spend time picking up garbage at a shelter, repairing a roof which has been worked on and carved on, replacing floors which have had fires built on them, or fishing scouring pads out of the only decent water supply.

It is a simple matter to use shelters correctly. *All* garbage should be burned in the fireplace. After a meal, only burned tin cans and glass remain in the fireplace—all else has burned, melted, or mysteriously gone away. The cans are then removed from the fireplace, crushed, and with the glass, placed in the can-pit provided. Used in this manner, a can-pit should last for years. Nevertheless, we rarely pass a shelter without finding its can-pit overflowing with paper, food, watermelon rinds, etc. The result is always a messy, smelly, and disgraceful comment on the hiking public. And, of course, one should never wash anything in the water supply of a shelter.

Work on the trail crew is one of the best jobs in the world. We thrive on hard work. We are proud of our scars and calluses. Cutting through a two-foot hardwood and leaving a smooth, clean ax cut is not only a matter of pride but also of sheer enjoyment. We may walk through the woods and notice a pile of huge logs stacked in six-foot lengths along the trail. Then we realize what a summer the '39 crew must have had. The trail crew has a tradition of hard work. We are merely doing what

young men ought to do in a summer. It does us good to work in the woods and to be tired at night. We learn, as Thoreau learned, the value of a place to live and work with nature. We enjoy our intimacy with the woods and with the mountains. Our experience includes the association with each other. It is a fine thing for young men to work together. Some inevitably lead and some follow, but when the job is finished only the crew is responsible.

Our ultimate satisfaction is that we feel we are working toward the fairest compromise between the pure conservationist and the exploitationist. Our work enables thousands to visit the White Mountains without significantly altering them. Our joy is the joy of the many who walk our trails and who love our forests and hills.