

## ***Trail Diversions***

### A Brief History of The Ouachita Mountain Hikers

The Ouachita Mountain Hikers (OMH) is a hiking club in central Arkansas, dedicated to enjoying the outdoors. The club was founded in 1986 by twenty hikers from Hot Springs, Arkansas. Today (2004), OMH has over 175 members, primarily from the Hot Springs area, but spreading across Arkansas and two other states. This document is a brief history of the club, pieced together from old notes, schedules, and interviews with members. Throughout its history, the club has been consistent in two basic things. First, members enjoy hiking; the club exists to have fun and to enjoy the trails of the beautiful Ouachita Mountains. Second, members realize that enjoying the trails brings a corresponding obligation to give something back; the club has been involved in various trail service activities since its founding.

Twenty initial members got together in March of 1986 and gave birth to the club. Quoting from organizer Bill Humphries in the first edition of the club newsletter "Trail Diversions":

"An organizational meeting for the Ouachita Mountain Hikers was held in room 2 of the Math/Science Building at Garland County Community College, on March 6, 1986. During this meeting, we were able to complete most of the mundane, boring, and occasionally confusing activity that are unfortunately necessary in organizing a new club. I appreciate the patience of all those who attended and promise that now we will quickly get on with the business of interest – hiking."

And they did just that. The organizational meeting was followed with a "moonlight hike" over West Mountain, in Hot Springs. Humphries, who had just been elected the first President of the club, recalls that first hike. "The footing was tough, in the dark, especially during the descent, but we enjoyed the beautiful view of Hot Springs." Paul Thomas, Vice President of the new club, was an instructor in astronomy at the community college and apparently added to that first hike by pointing out "a number of interesting celestial features." Paul also taught a class in hiking. One of his students, Martha Poe, not only joined the new club, but later served as President of OMH.

The founding members also elected Maggie Brown Secretary/Treasurer and appointed a committee of Mark Clippinger, Nancy Whytsell, and Joel DeWild to draft a set of by-laws. The group selected the name Ouachita Mountain Hikers, in honor of their beautiful home country and primary hiking ground.

The word Ouachita comes from the Choctaw Indian word "Owachita", meaning "hunting trip". The Ouachita Mountains form the natural setting of the central Arkansas region which was home to most of the hikers in the new club, and to most of their anticipated hikes. The Ouachita's are one of the oldest mountain ranges in North America, and one of only two mountain ranges in the western hemisphere

oriented east - west. The range stretches from Pinnacle Mountain, west of Little Rock, to Atoka, OK (about 60 miles into Oklahoma).

With the business of founding a club behind them, the first scheduled hike was a day trip to the Winding Stairs area on the Little Missouri River. The hike, still popular today, began at Albert Pike campground, climbed over the mountain and followed the river to the beautiful "stair steps" where the water falls from pool to pool. Many consider this one of the prettiest spots in Arkansas, and certainly one of the nicest swimming holes. The hike involved several wet crossings of the Little Missouri, so the group got a quick initiation into the concept of "waders". The first overnight hike was a trip to Blanchard Springs, AR, in the Ozarks, in November 1986. The group hiked the Sylamore Trail.

In October 1986, Paula Wallace was elected the club's first Secretary/Treasurer. Paula is the only charter member of the club still active in 2005. Club meetings that first year were held in the Math/Science Building at Garland County Community College, with the first program a talk on "Wildflowers of the Ouachita's" by a naturalist from Lake Ouachita State Park.

The first year of the club was also the first year of volunteer service. The major project that first year was a joint effort with the Bayou Chapter of the Ozark Society to construct the Athens - Big Fork Trail. Those of us who have hiked that trail aren't sure whether to thank them or curse them, however. Although a premier trail asset in the Ouachita Mountains, it is also one of the toughest hikes in Arkansas. In October 1986, OMH signed an agreement with the Ouachita National Forest / U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to construct a trail connecting Albert Pike and Little Missouri Falls. Today, the resulting trail is popularly known as the Little Missouri Trail. The club's first volunteer efforts for Hot Springs National Park (HSNP) were also initiated in 1986. The associations with the USFS and HSNP have remained through the present day.

The same leadership directed the new club for its first three years, and used that time to develop and sustain itself. In 1989, Ardis Ronne took over as President. The club logo, with hiking stick and a pair of boots, was established in 1989 and still in use today. The PO Box 371, still in use in 2004, was first rented in 1989. Paula Wallace took over as Historian, a position not formalized until the following year.

Most significant, however, 1989 was the first concentrated effort by OMH hikers to complete the Ouachita National Recreation Trail. One day a month was dedicated to "OT" hikes. This convention remains in the hike schedule today, and completing the trail has become a tradition for serious hikers in the club. It is estimated that at least fifty members of the club have completed all 223 miles of the OT, at one time or another. Good records have not been kept, but in 2004 there are 30 members still on the club roster, who have accomplished the feat.

In 1990, the by-laws were reviewed and revised for the first time. The primary change involved formalization of the election of club officers. The position of "Hike Chairman" was created, and Paula Wallace was given the job she was obviously meant to have. She held this position for the next ten years. Another future President, Ann Robb, joined the club in 1990. At the time she and her husband joined, only two other members (Ruth Butterfield and her husband) lived in Hot Springs Village. Today,

almost half the membership lives in the Village. In 1990, the first club Christmas Party was held at Martha Poe's home, as it would be for the next five years. Martha had just been elected President.

During Martha's Presidency in 1991-92, a fourth, "easy" hike was added to the monthly schedule, perhaps the first hint at changing demographics in the membership. The club "adopted" Hunt's Loop Trail to perform regular trail maintenance for the USFS, and they adopted two miles of Pine Mountain Road (AR 227) for litter patrol. This latter action received special recognition from the Arkansas Highway department as the 100th adoption in their anti-litter program. Club dues were set in 1991 at \$5, where they have remained for 14 years. Club meetings were held during this period at the "Ready Room" at the Arkansas Power & Light building. The first wearable club logos (iron-on patches) were created during this period thanks to Walt Schlemmer.

In 1992, the club took their first overnight trip to the Buffalo National River, an event that has been on the schedule once or twice every year since. Another crowd was attempting to complete the Ouachita Trail, under the leadership of Paula Wallace. Legend has it that Ann Robb's pumpkin bread was a good enough reason to join this group. The fame of the club must have been spreading at this point, because a three day trip to complete the Oklahoma end of the Ouachita Trail was recorded in the Malvern Daily Record on Oct 14, 1992. Paula, Ingrid & Bruce Woodward, and Ann & Charles Robb finished the Ouachita Trail later that year. Current members may find it hard to believe that these hikers completed the trail without benefit of the Tim Ernst "Ouachita Trail Guide", which had not yet been published. Perhaps even more amazing, one of the five (Bruce) was legally blind at the time. This first OT accomplishment is recorded in an "Ode to the Ouachita Trail" (sub-titled "Here's to Paula").

Club service activity during this period included the same jobs as the prior year, but added an agreement to help the USFS re-build the south loop of Little Blakely Trail, in conjunction with the Boy Scouts and Teen Challenge. Members also participated in a shore clean-up activity on Lake Ouachita.

Ingrid Woodward became President of OMH for 1993-1994. During that time, club membership grew to over 75. Ten of those members, including Ingrid and her husband Bruce, are still on the roster a decade later. Bruce is the only known blind hiker to belong to the club, and stories involving the blind hiker are numerous in club lore. A majority of members were still from the Hot Springs area, but membership stretched from Little Rock to Wilburton, OK. Members were also listed from Mt. Ida, Royal, Mena, Pearcy, and Conway.

Hike schedule highlights in 1993 included "starting over" on the Ouachita Trail, to begin the second cycle. Erna Hassebrock was now leading the trips, still without benefit of the Ernst guide. Two trips to the Ozark Highlands Trail were made, including the first of many to Richland Creek campground.

Ouachita Mountain Hikers participated in the first "National Trails Day", sponsored by the American Hiking Society in June 1993. That year's event was held at Albert Pike campground, and the club has participated every year since, at either Albert Pike or in HSNP. The OMH President became an active member of the Arkansas Trails Council in 1993, and the club has been active on the council ever since, including two years when OMH members chaired the Council. Ardis Ronne was Chairman in 1996; Kris McMillen in 2000.

Members continued to maintain Hunt's Loop and perform litter patrol on Pine Mt. Road. They also began two long-term relationships, important to both the club and the agencies ever since. Members participated in the National Park clean-up day, beginning a partnership with Jeff Heitzman, Volunteer Coordinator at HSNP. OMH also began a long standing association with Lake Ouachita State Park, and interpreter James Wilborn, by donating money to help purchase a barge, used for lake outings.

In 1994 the first "Welcome Back" hike and pot-luck brunch was held to kick off the hiking season after the summer break. This inaugural event included a hike on the Ouachita Trail, from highway AR 9 to Lake Sylvia, followed by a brunch beside the lake. The now familiar "Participant's Release" form was created during this period.

The next two years were significant in club history. Ann Robb was President and wanted to maintain a spirit of friendship and fun. Diverging demographics, however, had resulted in differences of opinion on the length and difficulty of hikes to be scheduled. The now familiar "Thursday / Saturday" compromise was developed and the schedule rhythm still used eight years later evolved. Thursday hikes were the longer, more difficult, all day events; Saturday hikes were the shorter, easier events. This ability to appeal to different contingencies has proven strength for the club, and was reflected at the time in a growth in membership to over 100!!

Hike schedule highlights included a Pancake Hike (come dressed in "crepe"), a Mystery Hike, overnights to the Ozark Highlands Trail and the Oklahoma portions of Ouachita Trail, and a Halloween hike – in costume! Member Wayne Rowan celebrated his 74th birthday with a nine mile hike on the Womble Trail. This was one of many tributes to the health benefits of hiking demonstrated throughout the club's history. In 1995, the monthly meetings moved to the Garland County Public Library, and the Christmas Party moved to the home of Janice and Harlan Jensen on Lake Hamilton, where it would be held for the next four years.

In August 1996, Hank Deutsch led a group on a back-packing expedition to the Rocky Mountains. The week long trek to the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness area of the San Isabel National Forest, in southern Colorado, included Erna Hassebrock, Paula Wallace, Deonne Carson, and Harlan & Janice Jensen. The group learned much, not only about the art of backpacking, team-building, and high altitude hiking (above 13,000'), but also about the unique ecological environment of the region.

In 1997, President Marvin Davis continued to expand the diversity in the hike schedule. The hike schedule was highlighted by a three day trip around Eagle Rock Loop, the 26-mile loop in Little Missouri River area, including two sections of trail built by the club ten years earlier. The club switched their litter pick up responsibility from Pine Mt Road to Gulpha Gorge Road, a responsibility they still honor. OMH interest in backpacking hit a peak in 1998, when Jack West was President. Membership broke 150 for the first time, even with four overnight backpacking trips on the schedule.

In 1998, nine people completed the Ouachita Trail, several of them for the second time. Paula Wallace, Ann Robb, and Bob Hostler completed their second pass; Erna Hassebrock, Janice and Harlan Jensen, Marvin and Ralph Davis, and Charline Knight completed the trail for the first time. Over the next few years, Ben Glazer, Bob Lane, Mike Moriarty, Wayne Rowan, and Jack West also completed the OT.

Ben Glazer served as President in 1999 – 2000. This period was marked by some new destinations for overnight hikes, including White Rock Mountain and Newton County (hikes at Pedestal Rocks, Glory Hole, and Hawksbill Crag). Extended summer trips were initiated during Ben's presidency, including trips to Colorado. The by-laws were amended, for only the second time in club history, to create the position of Trail Maintenance Chairman. Martha Doty took this position and has held it until 1995.

The club entered another new realm in 1999 – the digital world. E-mail became an important communication tool, and the "Hike Flash" was created as an electronic notice for current hike information. Nelson Ford created the club's first internet web-site, "omhikers.com". The site allowed on-line access to the hike schedule and the sharing of hiking photos. The Christmas party moved to the Hot Springs Bridge Club in 2000.

The Great Ice Storm of December 2000 proved the wisdom of the Trail Maintenance position created just a year prior. Kay Ford started her Presidency, 2001, with most of the trails in Arkansas closed due to ice storm damage. For three months, the club spent every hike day working on the trails. Under the vigorous leadership of Martha Doty, OMH members helped clear trails in State Parks (Lake Ouachita and Lake Catherine), in Hot Springs National Park, and throughout the Ouachita National Forest. It was late April before the group hiked just for fun, completing Seven Hollows Trail on Petit Jean Mountain. A year later, on National Trails Day, Martha Doty was named Arkansas Trail Volunteer of the Year" in recognition of her role in leading OMH efforts during the ice storm clean-up.

In 2001, the monthly meetings were still being held in the Garland County Public Library, but the Christmas Party was held at the Hot Springs Village Ouachita Room.

The next President, Jim Gifford (2002-2003) had been influenced ("deranged"?) by the ice storm clean-up experience. During his tenure, a Trail Maintenance Day was added to the hike schedule each month, and OMH T-shirts were designed and awarded to members who contributed 50 hours of trail maintenance effort during the year. Ben Glazer won the "Volunteer of the Year" award, sponsored by the Arkansas Trails Council, at the 2002 Arkansas Trails Festival. Toward the end of 2003, Ouachita Mountain Hikers adopted 27 miles (section 8) of the Ouachita Trail in an action that gave birth to a new organization -- Friends of the Ouachita Trail (FoOT). Although a separate entity from OMH, the founders of FoOT and three of its charter Directors were OMH members.

During 2002, the use of e-mail for club communication expanded, with the majority of the members having access to e-mail. The "Hike Flash" was expanded into a weekly newsletter that had details of current hikes, a look ahead at upcoming events, and various topics of interest to hikers, including a "hiker-to-hiker" section where hikers could share good tips.

During this period another thirteen people completed the Ouachita Trail, the most in any one year in club history. These folks, of course, relied heavily on the Tim Ernst Guide. Kay Ford (December 2002), was followed by Martha Doty, Don Haase, Rex Greer, Maria McLead, Kris and Billy McMillen, Sallye Waddell, and Mike and Pat Zeller in February 2003. At 76, Rex became the oldest club member to complete the trail, surpassing Jack West and Wayne Rowan. In May 2003, Nelson Ford, Jim Gifford, and

Dan Wingard finished the trail. This group became the first to be awarded the redesigned OMH Ouachita Trail Completion T-shirts, which are still in use today.

Some new events were added to the schedule in 2002/03, in an attempt to get more interaction between the "Thursday hikers" and the "Saturday hikers". The first annual "Dawn-to-Dusk in HSNP" event was held in 2002, in which an all day hike schedule around the National Park allowed hikers to do 13 miles, or any one of several segments of the thirteen miles. All participants were invited to dinner at the Faded Rose at the conclusion of the day. In October 2003, the club co-sponsored the first "Village Trails Day", with the Hot Springs Village Trails Committee. Hikers could hike eight village trails in one day, for a combined thirteen miles, or do any one of the village trails. An overnight hike used the Buffalo Lodge in the Buffalo River area and offered a variety of hikes, to appeal to both groups of hikers. In April of 2002, Rex Greer and about fifteen OMHikers celebrated his 76th birthday by hiking Seven Hollows Trail at Petit Jean State Park, demonstrating again the health benefits of hiking.

Summer trips to Colorado took place in both 2002 and 2003. The trip in August, 2003, culminated with eight OMH members climbing 14,110' Pikes Peak. The trail, generally considered the toughest in Colorado, climbs almost 7000 feet vertically, over its 13 mile length.

In 2004, Kris McMillen became President. Jim Gifford took over as Hike Chairman, and the other officers remained constant. We were been blessed with good weather and great hiking. We took our club's first trip to the Great Smoky Mountains in May, spending six days at Cades Cove, climbing Mt LeConte (2nd highest peak in Appalachian chain) and hiking a stretch of the Appalachian Trail.

During 2004, six more members completed the Ouachita Trail. In the spring, Ralph Klingsporn, Renate Springsted, and Ernie Weidenberger earned their shirts, and later in the year Loretta Melancon and Kenny Thompson completed the trek. In October/November 2004, Kris McMillen, 'EJ' Pangle, and John Cramm hiked the full length (223.6 miles) in 22 days. For Kris, this was her second time around, but the other two completed the trail for the first time. The official hike schedule coincided with the three through-hikers on several occasions, and individual members joined them for a day or more on several occasions. A celebration at Pinnacle Mountain State park marked the accomplishment as the three emerged from the woods.

In August 2004, another trip to the Rockies included two days of hiking in the Roosevelt Forest in Colorado, followed by six days of spectacular hiking in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. Twenty-two members participated in this trip, some covering more than 60 miles in the week.

The club continued trail maintenance activity under Martha Doty and litter patrol in Gulpha Gorge led by Rex Greer. At the end of the year, Jim Gifford became the third OMH member in four years to be recognized as the "Arkansas Trail Volunteer of the Year".

Kris was re-elected President in 2005, and the pace continued. Glenn Wortham took over as Trail Maintenance Chairman, only the second person to ever hold the position. Martha Doty was recognized for creating the post and serving for over five years. The year was marked by strong growth in membership, including several new "regulars" in both the Saturday and Thursday hiking groups.

In May 2005, our second annual trip to the Great Smoky Mountains was a tremendous success. Eight hikers participated in varying degrees in the hike schedule that included another assault on Mt. LeConte again (by the toughest route this time), one day on the Appalachian Trail, and visits to 5 of the top 8 waterfalls in the park.

Eight hikers completed the Ouachita Trail in 2005, including two groups of through-hikers. Cliff Harrison and Mike Wimsett completed a through-hike in the spring. Noted Appalachian Trail author JR "Model T" Tate spoke at the club in April 2005; he returned to Arkansas, joined the club, and teamed up with John Joswick to complete a back pack through hike of the Ouachita Trail in the fall. Also completing the trail this year were Don Baggett and the "three amigos", Phil Simpson, Ken Schultz, and Marv Weitzenfeld.

The new organization Friends of the Ouachita Trail (FoOT) had taken hold and was incorporated in Feb 2005. FoOT's purpose "to provide assistance for the maintenance, enhancement and use of the Ouachita National Recreation Trail" was drawing recognition state wide. As the organization grew, OMH became a participating organization member and refined their adoption responsibility to the ten miles of the OT traversing Flatside Wilderness.

On national Trails Day 2005, Kris McMillen was named by the American Hiking Society as the "Trail Volunteer of the Year" for the southern states region.

As 2006 starts, Marv Weitzenfeld became the twelfth President of OMH. Jim is still Hike Chair and Glenn is still task master for trail maintenance.

The hiking pace remains intense. We still hike every Thursday and every Saturday between September and June. 2006 started with a trip to complete the Oklahoma portions of the Ouachita Trail. Bo & Brenda Lea completed the trail during that trip, and Glenn Wortham completed it a month later. We have several new hikes on the schedule and we plan to return to the Smoky Mountains in May.

OMH still conducts trail maintenance once a month; with the majority of that now focused on the Ouachita Trail, under the auspices of Friends of the Ouachita Trail (FoOT). OMH supports HSNP by performing litter patrol on Gulpha Gorge Road, and providing hike leaders for HSNP events, such as Volksmarch (fall) and National Trails Day (spring). OMH members have individually adopted almost all of the trails in HSNP. OMH is still active on Arkansas Trails Council, with the OMH Hike Chairman as the Hiker representative on the council.

The club remains true to its founders and offers a variety of benefits to members --camaraderie, enjoyment of the outdoors, the health benefits of hiking, an appreciation for the beauty of the natural state, and an opportunity to serve and give back to the trails we enjoy.

***The future looks bright for the Ouachita Mountain Hikers!***

***See you on the trails!***