

An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning

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*This article appeared in the October 1921 edition of the **Journal of the American Institute of Architects**, at the time a major organ of the regional-planning movement.*

MacKaye envisioned a trail along the ridgecrests of the Appalachian Mountain chain from New England to the Deep South, connecting farms, work camps, and study camps that would be populated by eastern urbanites needing a break from the tensions of industrialization.

Something has been going on these past few strenuous years which, in the din of war and general upheaval, has been somewhat lost from the public mind. It is the slow quiet development of the recreational camp. It is something neither urban nor rural. It escapes the hecticness of the one, and the loneliness of the other. And it escapes also the common curse of both—the high powered tension of the economic scramble. All communities face an “economic” problem, but in different ways. The camp faces it through cooperation and mutual helpfulness, the others through competition and mutual fleeing.

We civilized ones also, whether urban or rural, are potentially helpless as canaries in a cage. The ability to cope with nature directly—unshielded by the weakening wall of civilization—is one of the admitted needs of modern times. It is the goal of the “scouting” movement. Not that we want to return to the plights of our Paleolithic ancestors. We want the strength of progress without its puniness. We want its conveniences without its fopperies. The ability to sleep and cook in the open is a good step forward. But “scouting” should not stop there. This is but a feint step from our canary bird existence. It should strike far deeper than this. We should seek the ability not only to cook food but to raise food with less aid—and less hindrance—from the complexities of commerce. And this is becoming daily of increasing practical importance. Scouting, then, has its vital connection with the problem of living.

A New Approach to the Problem of Living

The problem of living is at bottom an economic one. And this alone is bad enough, even in a period of so-called “normalcy.” But living has been considerably complicated of late in various

ways—by war, by questions of personal liberty, and by “menaces” of one kind or another. There have been created bitter antagonisms. We are undergoing also the bad combination of high prices and unemployment. This situation is world wide—the result of a world-wide war.

It is no purpose of this little article to indulge in coping with any of these big questions. The nearest we come to such effrontery is to suggest more comfortable seats and more fresh air for those who have to consider them. A great professor once said that “optimism is oxygen.” Are we getting all the “oxygen” we might for the big tasks before us? “Let us wait,” we are told, “till we solve this cussed labor problem. Then we’ll have the leisure to do great things.” But suppose that while we wait the chance for doing them is passed?

It goes without saying that we should work upon the labor problem. Not just the matter of “capital and labor” but the real labor problem—how to reduce the day’s drudgery. The toil and chore of life should, as labor saving devices increase, form a diminishing proportion of the average day and year. Leisure and the higher pursuits will thereby come to form an increasing portion of our lives.

But will leisure mean something “higher”? Here is a question indeed. The coming of leisure in itself will create its own problem. As the problem of labor “solves,” that of leisure arises. There seems to be no escape from problems. We have neglected to improve the leisure which should be ours as a result of replacing stone and bronze with iron and steam. Very likely we have been cheated out of the bulk of this leisure. The efficiency of modern industry has been placed at 25 percent of its reasonable possibilities. This may be too low or too high. But the leisure that we do succeed in getting—is this developed to an efficiency much higher?

The customary approach to the problem of living relates to work rather than play. Can we increase the efficiency of our working

time? Can we solve the problem of labor? If so we can widen the opportunities for leisure. The new approach reverses this mental process. Can we increase the efficiency of our spare time? Can we develop opportunities for leisure as an aid in solving the problem of labor?

An Undeveloped Power—Our Spare Time

How much spare time have we, and how much power does it represent?

The great body of working people—the industrial workers, the farmers, and the housewives—have no allotted spare time or “vacations.” The business clerk usually gets two weeks’ leave, with pay, each year. The U.S. Government clerk gets thirty days. The business man is likely to give himself two weeks or a month. Farmers can get off for a week or more at a time by doubling up on one another’s chores. Housewives might do likewise.

As to the industrial worker—in mine or factory—his average “vacation” is all too long. For it is “leave of absence without pay.” According to recent official figures the average industrial worker in the United States, during normal times, is employed about four fifths of the time—say 42 weeks in the year. The other ten weeks he is employed in seeking employment.

The proportionate time for true leisure of the average adult American appears, then, to be meager indeed. But a goodly portion have (or take) about two weeks in the year. The industrial worker during the estimated ten weeks between jobs must of course go on eating and living. His savings may enable him to do this without undue worry. He could, if he felt he could spare the time from job hunting, and if suitable facilities were provided, take two weeks of his ten on a real vacation. In one way or another, therefore, the average adult in this country could devote each year a period of about two weeks in doing the things of his own choice.

Here is enormous undeveloped power—the spare time of our population. Suppose just one percent of it were focused upon one particular job, such as increasing the facilities for the outdoor community life. This would be more than a million people, representing over two million weeks a year. It would be equivalent to 40,000 persons steadily on the job.

A Strategic Camping Base—The Appalachian Skyline

Where might this imposing force lay out its strategic camping ground?

Camping grounds, of course, require wild lands. These in America are fortunately still available. They are in every main region of the country. They are the undeveloped or underdeveloped areas. Except in the Central States the wild lands now remaining are for the most part among the mountain ranges—the Sierras, the Cascades and the Rocky Mountains of the West and the Appalachian Mountains of the East.

Extensive national playgrounds have been reserved in various parts of the country for use by the people for camping and various kindred purposes. Most of these are in the West where Uncle Sam's public lands were located. They are in the Yosemite, the Yellowstone, and many other National Parks—covering about six million acres in all. Splendid work has been accomplished in fitting these Parks for use. The National Forests, covering about 130 million acres—chiefly in the West—are also equipped for public recreation purposes.

A great public service has been started in these Parks and Forests in the field of outdoor life. They have been called “playgrounds of the people.” This they are for the Western people—and for those in the East who can afford time and funds for an extended trip in a Pullman car. But camping grounds to be of the most use to the people should be as near as possible to the center of population. And this is in the East.

It fortunately happens that we have throughout the most densely populated portions of the United States a fairly continuous belt of under-developed lands. These are contained in the several ranges which form the Appalachian chain of mountains. Several National Forests have been purchased in this belt. These mountains, in several ways rivaling the western scenery, are within a day's ride from centers containing more than half the population of the United States. The region spans the climate of New England and the cotton belt; it contains the crops and the people of the North and the South.

The skyline along the top of the main divides and ridges of the Appalachians would overlook a mighty part of the nation's activities. The rugged lands of this skyline would form a camping base strategic in the country's work and play.

Let us assume the existence of a giant standing high on the skyline along these mountain ridges, his head just scraping the floating clouds. What would he see from this skyline as he strode along its length from north to south?

Starting out from Mt. Washington, the highest point in the northeast, his horizon takes in one of the original happy hunting grounds of America—the "Northwoods," a country of pointed firs extending from the lakes and rivers of northern Maine to those of the Adirondacks. Stepping across the Green Mountains and the Berkshires to the Catskills, he gets his first view of the crowded east—a chain of smoky bee-hive cities extending from Boston to Washington and containing a third of the population of the Appalachian drained area. Bridging the Delaware Water Gap and the Susquehanna on the picturesque Alleghany folds across Pennsylvania he notes more smoky columns - the big plants between Scranton and Pittsburgh that get out the basic stuff of modern industry—iron and coal. In relieving contrast he steps across the Potomac near Harpers Ferry and pushes through into the wooded wilderness of the southern Appalachians where he finds preserved much of the primal aspects of the days of Daniel Boone. Here he finds, over on the Monongehela side the black coal

of bituminous and the white coal of water power. He proceeds along the great divide of the upper Ohio and sees flowing to waste, sometimes in terrifying floods, waters capable of generating untold hydro-electric energy and of bringing navigation to many a lower stream. He looks over the Natural Bridge and out across the battle fields around Appomattox. He finds himself finally in the midst of the great Carolina hardwood belt. Resting now on the top of Mt. Mitchell, highest point east of the Rockies, he counts up on his big long fingers the opportunities which yet await development along the skyline he has passed.

First he notes the opportunities for recreation. Throughout the Southern Appalachians, throughout the Northwoods, and even through the Alleghanies that wind their way among the smoky industrial towns of Pennsylvania, he recollects vast areas of secluded forests, pastoral lands, and water courses, which, with proper facilities and protection, could be made to serve as the breath of a real life for the toilers in the bee-hive cities along the Atlantic seaboard and elsewhere.

Second, he notes the possibilities for health and recuperation. The oxygen in the mountain air along the Appalachian skyline is a natural resource (and a national resource) that radiates to the heavens its enormous health-giving powers with only a fraction of a percent utilized for human rehabilitation. Here is a resource that could save thousands of lives. The sufferers of tuberculosis, anemia and insanity go through the whole strata of human society. Most of them are helpless, even those economically well off. They occur in the cities and right in the skyline belt. For the farmers, and especially the wives of farmers, are by no means escaping the grinding-down process of our modern life.

Most sanitariums now established are perfectly useless to those afflicted with mental disease—the most terrible, usually, of any disease. Many of these sufferers could be cured. But not merely by “treatment.” They need acres not medicine. Thousands of acres of this mountain land should be devoted to them with whole communities planned and equipped for their cure.

Next after the opportunities for recreation and recuperation our giant counts off, as a third big resource, the opportunities in the Appalachian belt for employment on the land. This brings up a need that is becoming urgent—the redistribution of our population, which grows more and more top heavy.

The rural population of the United States, and of the Eastern States adjacent to the Appalachians, has now dipped below the urban. For the whole country has fallen from 60 per cent of the total in 1900 to 49 per cent in 1920: for the Eastern States it has fallen, during this period, from 55 per cent to 45 per cent. Meantime the per capita area of improved farmland has dropped, in the Eastern States, from 3.35 acres to 2.43 acres. This is a shrinkage of nearly 28 percent in 20 years: in the States from Maine to Pennsylvania the shrinkage has been 40 per cent.

There are in the Appalachian belt probably 25 million acres of grazing and agricultural land awaiting development. Here is room for a whole new rural population. Here is an opportunity—if only the way can be found—for that counter migration from city to country that has so long been prayed for. But our giant in pondering on this resource is discerning enough to know that its utilization is going to depend upon some new deal in our agricultural system. This he knows if he has ever stooped down and gazed in the sunken eyes either of the Carolina “cracker” or of the Green Mountain “hayseed.”

Forest land as well as agricultural might prove an opportunity for steady employment in the open. But this again depends upon a new deal. Forestry must replace timber devastation and its consequent hap-hazard employment. And this the giant knows if he has looked into the rugged face of the homeless “don’t care a damn” lumberjack of the Northwoods.

Such are the outlooks—such the opportunities—seen by a discerning spirit from the Appalachian skyline.

Possibilities in the New Approach

Let's put up now to the wise and trained observer the particular question before us. What are the possibilities in the new approach to the problem of living? Would the development of the outdoor community life—as an offset and relief from the various shackles of commercial civilization—be practicable and worth while? From the experience of observations and thoughts along the sky-line here is a possible answer:

There are several possible gains from such an approach.

First there would be the “oxygen” that makes for a sensible optimism. Two weeks spent in the real open—right now, this year and next—would be a little real living for thousands of people which they would be sure of getting before they died. They would get a little fun as they went along regardless of problems being “solved.” This would not damage the problems and it would help the folks.

Next there would be perspective. Life for two weeks on the mountain top would show up many things about life during the other fifty weeks down below. The latter could be viewed as a whole—away from its heat, and sweat, and irritations. There would be a chance to catch a breath, to study the dynamic forces of nature and the possibilities of shifting to them the burdens now carried on the backs of men. The reposeful study of these forces should provide a broad gauged enlightened approach to the problems of industry. Industry would come to be seen in its true perspective - as a means in life and not as an end in itself. The actual partaking of the recreative and non-industrial life—systematically by the people and not spasmodically by a few—should emphasize the distinction between it and the industrial life. It should stimulate the quest for enlarging the one and reducing the other. It should put new zest in the labor movement. Life and study of this kind should emphasize the need of going to the roots of industrial questions and of avoiding superficial thinking and rash action. The problems of the farmer, the coal

miner, and the lumberjack could be studied intimately and with minimum partiality. Such an approach should bring the poise that goes with understanding.

Finally these would be new clues to constructive solutions. The organization of the cooperative camping life would tend to draw people out of the cities. Coming as visitors they would be loath to return. They would become desirous of settling down in the country—to work in the open as well as play. The various camps would require food. Why not raise food, as well as consume it, on the cooperative plan? Food and farm camps should come about as a natural sequence. Timber also is required. Permanent small scale operations should be encouraged in the various Appalachian National Forests. The government now claims this as a part of its forest policy. The camping life would stimulate forestry as well as a better agriculture. Employment in both would tend to become enlarged.

How far these tendencies would go the wisest observer of course can not tell. They would have to be worked out step by step. But the tendencies at least would be established. They would be cutting channels leading to constructive achievement in the problem of living: they would be cutting across those now leading to destructive blindness.

A Project for Development

It looks, then, as if it might be worth while to devote some energy at least to working out a better utilization of our spare time. The spare time for one per cent of our population would be equivalent, as above reckoned, to the continuous activity of some 40,000 persons. If these people were on the skyline, and kept their eyes open, they would see the things that the giant could see. Indeed this force of 40,000 would be a giant in itself. It could walk the skyline and develop its various opportunities. And this is the job that we propose: a project to develop the opportunities—for

recreation, recuperation, and employment—in the region of the Appalachian skyline.

The project is one for a series of recreational communities throughout the Appalachian chain of mountains from New England to Georgia, these to be connected by a walking trail. Its purpose is to establish a base for a more extensive and systematic development of outdoors community life. It is a project in housing and community architecture.

No scheme is proposed in this particular article for organizing or financing this project. Organizing is a matter of detail to be carefully worked out. Financing depends on local public interest in the various localities affected.

There are four chief features of the Appalachian project:

1. The Trail—

The beginnings of an Appalachian trail already exist. They have been established for several years—in various localities along the line. Specially good work in trail building has been accomplished by the Appalachian Mountain Club in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and by the Green Mountain Club in Vermont. The latter association has already built the “Long Trail” for 210 miles thorough the Green Mountains—four fifths of the distance from the Massachusetts line to the Canadian. Here is a project that will logically be extended. What the Green Mountains are to Vermont the Appalachians are to eastern United States. What is suggested, therefore, is a “long trail” over the full length of the Appalachian skyline, from the highest peak in the north to the highest peak in the south—from Mt. Washington to Mt. Mitchell.

The trail should be divided into sections, each consisting preferably of the portion lying in a given State, or subdivision thereof. Each section should be in the immediate charge of a local group of people. Difficulties might arise over the use of private property—especially that amid agricultural lands on the crossovers between ranges. It might be sometimes necessary to

obtain a State franchise for the use of rights of way. These matters could readily be adjusted, provided there is sufficient local public interest in the project as a whole. The various sections should be under some sort of general federated control, but no suggestions regarding this form are made in this article.

Not all of the trail within a section could, of course, be built all at once. It would be a matter of several years. As far as possible the work undertaken for any one season should complete some definite usable link—as up or across one peak. Once completed it should be immediately opened for local use and not wait on the completion of other portions. Each portion built should, of course, be rigorously maintained and not allowed to revert to disuse. A trail is as serviceable as its poorest link.

The trail could be made, at each stage of its construction, of immediate strategic value in preventing and fighting forest fires. Lookout stations could be located at intervals along the way. A forest fire service could be organized in each section which should tie in with the services with the services of the Federal and State Governments. The trail would immediately become a battle line against fire.

A suggestion for the location of the trail and its main branches is shown on the accompanying map.

2. Shelter Camps—

These are the usual accompaniments of the trails which have been built in the White and Green Mountains. They are the trail's equipment for use. They should be located at convenient distances so as to allow a comfortable day's walk between each. They should be equipped always for sleeping and certain of them for serving meals—after the function of the Swiss chalets. Strict regulation is required to assure that equipment is used and not abused. As far as possible the blazing and constructing of the trail and building of camps should be done by volunteer workers. For volunteer "work" is really "play." The spirit of cooperation, as usual in such enterprises, should be stimulated throughout. The

enterprise should, of course, be conducted without profit. The trail must be well guarded—against the yegg-man and against the profiteer.

3. Community Groups—

These would grow naturally out of the shelter camps and inns. Each would consist of a little community on or near the trail (perhaps on a neighboring lake) where people could live in private domiciles. Such a community might occupy a substantial area—perhaps a hundred acres or more. This should be bought and owned as a part of the project. No separate lots should be sold therefrom. Each camp should be a self-owning community and not a real-estate venture. The use of the separate domiciles, like all other features of the project, should be available without profit.

These community camps should be carefully planned in advance. They should not be allowed to become too populous and thereby defeat the very purpose for which they are created. Greater numbers should be accommodated by more communities, not larger ones. There is room, without crowding, in the Appalachian region for a very large camping population. The location of these community camps would form a main part of the regional planning and architecture.

These communities would be used for various kinds of non-industrial activity. They might eventually be organized for special purposes—for recreation, for recuperation and for study. Summer schools or seasonal field courses could be established and scientific travel courses organized and accommodated in the different communities along the trail. The community camp should become something more than a mere “playground”: it should stimulate every line of outdoor non-industrial endeavor.

4. Food and Farm Camps—

These might not be organized at first. They would come as a later development. The farm camp is the natural supplement of the community camp. Here is the same spirit of cooperation and well

ordered action the food and crops consumed in the outdoor living would as far as practically be sown and harvested.

Food and farm camps could be established as special communities in adjoining valleys. Or they might be combined with the community camps with the inclusion of surrounding farm lands. Their development could provide tangible opportunity for working out by actual experiment a fundamental matter in the problem of living. It would provide one definite avenue of experiment in getting "back to the land." It would provide an opportunity for those anxious to settle down in the country: it would open up a possible source for new, and needed, employment. Communities of this type are illustrated by the Hudson Guild Farm in New Jersey.

Fuel wood, logs, and lumber are other basic needs of the camps and communities along the trail. These also might be grown and forested as part of the camp activity, rather than bought in the lumber market. The nucleus of such an enterprise has already been started at Camp Tamiment, Pennsylvania, on a lake not far from the route of the proposed Appalachian trail. The camp has been established by a labor group in New York City. They have erected a sawmill on their tract of 2000 acres and have built the bungalows of their community from their own timber.

Farm camps might ultimately be supplemented by permanent forest camps through the acquisition (or lease) of wood and timber tracts. These of course should be handled under a system of forestry so as to have a continuously growing crop of material. The object sought might be accomplished through long term timber sale contracts with the Federal Government on some of the Appalachian National Forests. Here would be another opportunity for permanent, steady, healthy employment in the open.

Elements of Dramatic Appeal

The results achievable in the camp and scouting life are common knowledge to all who have passed beyond the tenderest age therein. The camp community is a sanctuary and a refuge from the scramble of every-day worldly commercial life. It is in essence a retreat from profit. Cooperation replaces antagonism, trust replaces suspicion, emulation replaces competition. An Appalachian trail, with its camps, communities, and spheres of influence along the skyline, should, with reasonably good management, accomplish these achievements. And they possess within them the elements of a deep dramatic appeal.

Indeed the lure of the scouting life can be made the most formidable enemy of the lure of militarism (a thing with which this country is menaced along with all others). It comes the nearest perhaps, of things thus far projected, to supplying what Professor James once called a "moral equivalent of war." It appeals to the primal instincts of a fighting heroism, of volunteer service and of work in a common cause.

Those instincts are pent up forces in every human and they demand their outlet. This is the avowed object of the boy scout and girl scout movement, but it should not be limited to juveniles.

The building and protection of an Appalachian trail, with its various communities, interests, and possibilities, would form at least one outlet. Here is a job for 40,000 souls. This trail could be made to be, in a very literal sense, a battle line against fire and flood—and even against disease. Such battles—against the common enemies of man—still lack, it is true, "the punch" of man vs. man. There is but one reason—publicity. Militarism has been made colorful in a world of drab. But the care of the country side, which the scouting life instills, is vital in any real protection of "home and country." Already basic it can be made spectacular. Here is something to be dramatized.