

ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTER

General Foundation Program – Level 2

Learning Outcome(s)	LO 1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,10
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Grandma Gatewood: The First Woman to Solo Hike the Entire Appalachian Trail
By AMC Staff

A

In 1955, Emma “Grandma” Gatewood told her children that she was “going for a hike in the woods” – little did they know that this hike would be the entire 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail (A.T.), the longest hiking-only footpath in the world. Though hiking the entire A.T. is already an impressive achievement, Gatewood’s trip was even more remarkable for a number of reasons; she was 67 years old at the time, a mother of 11, and a grandmother of 23.

B

Emma Rowena Caldwell was born on October 25, 1887 on a farm in Gallia County, Ohio. She had always lived a rather difficult life. Her father, Hugh Caldwell, a Civil War veteran, had lost his leg after being wounded. As a child, she was often called on to do the hard manual labor that the farm required, and she shared just four beds with her 14 siblings in the family’s log cabin. At the age of 19, Emma married Perry Clayton Gatewood, a 26-year-old farmer who put her to work building fences and mixing cement.

C

In the 1950s, when all of her children were out of the house, Gatewood read a National Geographic article about Earl Shaffer, the first man to thru-hike the A.T. The fact that no woman had solo hiked the A.T. meant a challenge to her. Gatewood’s daughter talked about that her mother had said: “If those men can do it, I can do it.”

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D

Her first attempt at the A.T. happened in 1953. She started in Maine, but it was a complete failure. She broke her glasses, got lost, and was rescued by a few rangers who told her to go home. Two years later, Gatewood made the trek again, but this time, she started in Georgia to avoid the rangers who had discouraged her on her first trip. She never told her children where she was going – she just told them that she was going for a hike because she was worried that her kids would try to stop her. When Gatewood began, she brought with her just a homemade denim bag with a blanket, a shower curtain, a cup, a canteen and bottle for water, a small pot, a spoon, a Swiss Army knife, a first-aid kit, pins, a flashlight, a piece of rope, a raincoat, a warm coat, a change of clothes, and her trusty Keds sneakers. She wore out seven pairs of Keds during the entirety of her trip. Remarkably, Gatewood did not bring a sleeping bag, a tent, a compass, or a map. Instead, she relied on the hospitality and kindness of strangers who lived along the trail for food and shelter. This was rather easy to do, because Gatewood became something of a local celebrity in the neighboring towns.

E

Her own children found out about her trip because a newspaper clipping had made its way to her hometown in Ohio. Despite this hospitality, the trip was not entirely comfortable. Gatewood often slept on front porch swings, under picnic benches, or on a bed of leaves. She ate canned Vienna sausages, raisins, nuts, chicken bouillon cubes, or greens she found on the trail. Gatewood was particularly resourceful and had learned which plants were edible before her trip.

F

The day before she climbed Katahdin to complete her hike, Gatewood fell and broke her glasses again, just as she had on her first attempt. She also bruised her face and sprained her ankle. In spite of this, on September 25, 1955 after 146 days of hiking, she completed the one last stretch to reach Katahdin, making history as the first woman to solo hike the A.T. in one season. Upon reaching the summit of Katahdin on that cold and windy day, she sang “America the Beautiful.” She averaged 14 miles a day, often hiking from sunrise until she was exhausted. Given her age, limited gear, and the condition of the trail, the pace with which she hiked was brilliant.

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But Gatewood didn't stop there. Two years later, she returned to thru-hike the trail again, making her the first person to hike the full Appalachian Trail twice. In 1964, she hiked it a third time.

When one reporter asked why she wanted to hike the A.T., Gatewood stated: "Because I wanted to."

impressive – great, brilliant

compass – an instrument that has a magnetized pointer

manual labor – physical work

bruise/sprain – hurt

exhausted – very tired

log cabin – small house made of wood

gear – tools

ranger – guardian of a park

solo hike – trekking alone

edible – you can eat it without getting sick

I. Headings: Write the letter of the paragraph which matches the title A-F.

1. The things "Grandma" Gatewood took for her trips.
2. She had a difficult childhood.
3. She became the first woman to solo hike the A.T. in one season.
4. Gatewood was in her sixties when she made the trip successfully the first time.
5. The trip, for the most part, was very uncomfortable.
6. Gatewood was inspired by reading an article.

II. True/ False/ Not Given

1. Between her first and second hike 5 years passed.
2. She had 7 sons and 4 daughters.
3. She knew which plants were edible.
4. The AT is the shortest hiking-only footpath in the world.
5. She didn't bring any food with her on the trips.

Modified from: <https://www.outdoors.org/resources/amc-outdoors/history/grandma-gatewood-the-first-woman-to-solo-hike-the-entire-appalachian-trail/>