

Peace Pilgrim's 1952 Appalachian Trail Journey

First woman to hike the entire AT in one season.

*Compiled by Bruce Nichols
Friends of Peace Pilgrim Board Member*



Mildred Norman Ryder (later Peace Pilgrim) in her hiking days

In 1952, the year before she began the pilgrimage, Peace Pilgrim, then known as Mildred Norman Ryder, set out on another memorable journey. On April 26 of that year, in the company of fellow Philadelphian Richard Lamb, Mildred began the 2050 mile walk north from Mt. Oglethorp in Georgia toward Mt. Katahdin, in northern Maine. Mildred's passion for walking and her deep love for the beauty, inspiration, and peace she found in the natural world had lured her to the trail. By the time she completed the journey in October of that year she would become the first woman to walk the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in one season.

Only three other hikers had previously completed the 2050 mile Appalachian Trail in one calendar year. Earl Shaffer was the first in 1948. Three years passed before Earl's feat was repeated. In 1951 two other men, Gene Espy and Chester Dziengielewski completed the journey in one season.

Mildred and Dick also became the first hikers to complete a "flip-flop" transit of the Appalachian Trail. They initially walked north to the Susquehanna River at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, then

traveled to Mt. Katahdin in Maine and walked south to the point at which they had left the trail. On the way back they made a small 165-mile detour to the Canadian border along the northern half of the Long Trail in Vermont. They then returned to central Vermont to complete their journey south on the AT.

For many years there was confusion about Mildred's identity. In most of the early histories of the Appalachian Trail she was listed as Mildred Lamb and it was assumed that she and Dick were a married couple. Society was more restrictive in 1952 and the idea of an unmarried man and woman hiking alone in the woods for months on end would have been scandalous. To avoid any problems, the pair would introduce themselves simply as "Dick Lamb and Mil."

There are a few historic documents that are connected with their journey. The only one that still exists that was directly from their hands is a postcard sent by Dick Lamb on August 12, 1952 from Bigelow, Maine to the Appalachian Trail Conference headquarters then in Washington, DC, describing their progress (*see actual post card at end of article*):

Dear Miss Stephenson,

As editor of "Appalachian Trailway News," you may be interested in hearing a few more facts about the first couple (especially the *first woman*) to traverse *on foot alone* the entire 2,050 mile Appalachian Trail in one season of less than 5 months. On April 26 we started from Mt. Oglethorpe and went up to Harrisburg in 2 1/2 months, hiking about 15-20 miles a day and camping out each night. Then we went by car to Mt. Katahdin, Maine, and walked already 200 miles of the wild northern half of the Trail, back toward Penna., where we expect to be by October 1. This trip is a healthful experience in simple, natural living.

Adventurously, two more hikers of the 'A.T.,'

Dick Lamb & Mildred

(p.s. - We have kept in touch with Earl Shaffer.)

We know from [Earl Shaffer](#) that Peace Pilgrim was corresponding with him during the hike. In his book, *The Appalachian Trail: Calling Me Back to the Hills*, written after his third thru-hike of the trail in 1998 at the age of 79, Earl writes, "Mildred sent me a series of postcards written so finely that the contents could have filled an ordinary letter. After ending the trip, she visited me at home." Unfortunately the postcards did not make it into the Earl Shaffer collection at the Smithsonian and appear to be lost.

That winter, as Peace Pilgrim was beginning her pilgrimage in California, the following notice appeared in the January 1953 edition of the Appalachian Trailway News:

At various times during the summer, persons on the Trail reported meeting "Dick and Mil", as they introduced themselves, who were making a through trip. From the south, word came that they were heading for Katahdin. But later, those meeting them in the north insisted they were headed south. The mystery was solved early in November when a letter from Dick Lamb of Philadelphia reported that they left Mt. Oglethorpe on April 26, and walked north to the Susquehanna River. There they took a bus for Millinocket, Maine. They then went to Katahdin and traveled south. They turned aside on reaching the

Long Trail and went to the Canadian border, but came back to the A.T. and continued on to the Susquehanna River.

While not a continuous trip over the Trail, this was a traverse of the entire Trail route in one season. *(Appalachian Trailway News - Vol. 14, #1 January 1953. Page 14)*

In an era before ripstop nylon, gore-tex, freeze dried meals, and other hi-tech gear they lived simply and carried what today would be considered a minimalist amount of equipment. In recalling the journey Peace Pilgrim said:

I lived out-of-doors completely, supplied with only one pair of slacks and shorts, one blouse and sweater, a lightweight blanket, and two double plastic sheets, into which I sometimes stuffed leaves. I was not always completely dry and warm, but I enjoyed it thoroughly. My menu, morning and evening, was two cups of uncooked oatmeal soaked in water and flavored with brown sugar; at noon two cups of double strength dried milk, plus any berries, nuts or greens found in the woods.

(Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Works in Her Own Words - Pg.54)

Life on the trail agreed with her. She always enjoyed and found inspiration in the beauties of nature and in a healthy active life. Hiking reinforced her belief in simplicity and confirmed her ability to live at need level. She encouraged others to share in this learning practice.

If you are free, I recommend a hiking trip on a wilderness footpath. How inspiring it is to walk all day in the sunshine and sleep all night under the stars. What a wonderful experience in simple, natural living. Since you carry your food, sleeping equipment, etc., on your back, you learn quickly that unnecessary possessions are unnecessary burdens. You soon realize what the essentials of life are--such as warmth when you are cold, a dry spot on a rainy day, the simplest food when you are hungry, pure cool water when you are thirsty. You soon put material things in their proper place, realizing that they are there for *use*, but relinquishing them when they are not useful. You soon experience and learn to appreciate the great freedom of simplicity.

(Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Works in Her Own Words - Pg.54)

It may have been that the vision for the pilgrimage came toward the end of the AT journey or possibly in the months shortly before with the hike on the trail serving as a proving ground for the 1953 cross-country walk. She describes the experience as follows:

The inspiration for the pilgrimage came at this time. I sat high upon a hill overlooking rural New England. The day before I had slipped out of harmony, and the evening before I had thought to God, "It seems to me that if I could always remain in harmony I could be of greater usefulness--for every time I slip out of harmony it impairs my usefulness."

When I awoke at dawn I was back on the spiritual mountaintop with a wonderful feeling. I knew that I would never need to descend again into the valley. I knew that for me the struggle was over, that finally I had succeeded in giving my life or finding inner peace. Again this is a point of no return. You can never go back into the struggle. The struggle is over now because you *will* to do the right thing and you don't need to be pushed into it.

I went out for a time along with God. While I was out a thought struck my mind: I felt a strong inner motivation toward the pilgrimage--toward this special way of witnessing for peace.

I saw, in my mind's eye, myself walking along and wearing the garb of my mission... I saw a map of the United States with the large cities marked -- and it was as though someone had taken a colored crayon and marked a zigzag line across, coast to coast and border to border, from Los Angeles to New York City. I knew what I was to do. And that was a vision of my first year's pilgrimage route in 1953!

I entered a new and wonderful world. My life was blessed with a meaningful purpose.
(Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Works in Her Own Words - Pg.22)

Though it is not entirely clear if the inspiration for the pilgrimage occurred during her Appalachian Trail hike or sometime in the months before, the journey did confirm to Mildred that she could manage and thrive on the rigors of a longer walk. Of course that walk would be of a much different nature and be completely "on foot and on faith." Even the simple gear carried on the trail would be left behind.

Shortly after finishing her hike Peace Pilgrim was interviewed by Steve Alison on radio station WPEN in Philadelphia.

STEVE: "I want you to meet Mildred. This summer she walked the entire length of the 2050 mile long Appalachian Trail, and she is the first woman to have accomplished this feat. In case you don't know, the Trail is a rugged wilderness footpath which follows the Appalachian mountain range from Maine to Georgia. Well, Mildred, was it an enjoyable experience or was it a trying experience?"

MILDRED: "Oh, it was a very enjoyable experience, and a very educational experience, and a very inspirational experience. I don't mean there were no hardships. There were some, of, course. But they were just a part of the whole wonderful experience, and it wouldn't have been as wonderful without them."

STEVE: "You spoke of it being an educational experience. In what way would you consider it educational?"

MILDRED: "In many ways, Steve, but let me mention one thing that I think is important. Life on the trail, which is not insulated from nature as life in the city is, tends to make you realize what the actual essentials of physical well-being are - such as warmth when you are cold, a dry spot on a rainy day, the simplest food when you are hungry. Since you carry your food, sleeping equipment, and so forth, on your back, you learn very quickly that unnecessary possessions are unnecessary burdens. This is a lesson that I hope all hikers will carry home with them, because it is true in every-day life as well as on the trail that material possessions much in excess of need tend to become burdens."

STEVE: "Getting back to hiking, Mildred, as wonderful as you say your experience this summer was, I don't think you'd consider doing it again, would you?"

MILDRED: "I wouldn't consider doing the Appalachian Trail again right now, Steve, but I would consider doing some more hiking. In fact, I have another hiking trip all planned - and this time it's definitely on the optimistic side - it's a peace pilgrimage. There is hope. (May I read just a little more from my bulletin?) 'While we watch the storm clouds gather and prepare for the storm, let us never forget that the sun still shines behind those dark clouds, and may somehow break through before the storm descends. I see sunshine in the real desire for peace in the hearts of humanity, even though the human family gropes toward peace blindly, not knowing the way.' I think that those of us who have found the way to peace should be shouting it from the rooftops, and with this thought in mind I undertake my peace pilgrimage. Starting January 1st, I shall walk from Los Angeles to New York and then to Washington D.C. and talk to everyone who will listen to me about the way to peace. I'm even planning to wear a sign, the back of which will read, 'Walking Coast to Coast for Peace' and the front, 'Peace Pilgrim'." *(FoPP Newsletter #2)*

Garbed in her simple blue tunic emblazoned with those words and relying on the goodness of her fellow beings, she would embark on a journey that has now stretched far beyond the pathways of the Appalachian Trail or even the many thousands of miles of roads traveled during her 28-year pilgrimage. The pilgrimage has spread around the world to touch the lives and hearts of millions with her simple and inspiring message of peace.

Watch a [YouTube interview](#) with Bruce Nichols about Peace Pilgrim's AT hike.

Dick Lamb & Mildred
c/o General Delivery
Borham, N.H.

THIS SIDE OF CARD IS FOR ADDRESS

Miss Jean Stephenson
Apt. 1100 1100
1228 Eye St., N.W.
Washington 5, D.C.

Bigelow, Maine
August 12, 1952

Dear Miss Stephenson,
As editor of "Appalachian Trailway News," you may be interested in hearing a few more facts about the first couple (especially the first woman) to traverse on foot along the entire 2050-mile Appalachian Trail in one season of less than 5 months. On April 26 we started from Mt. Oglethorpe and went up to Harrisburg in 2 1/2 months, hiking about 15-20 miles a day and camping out each night. Then we went by car to Mt. Katahdin, Maine, and walked already 200 miles of the wild northern half of the Trail, back toward Pennsylvania where we expect to be by October 1. This trip is a healthful experience in simple, natural living. Adventurously, two more hikers of the "A.T."
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