

Opinion: Appalachian 'Trail Magic' makes us grateful for the Smokies, George Masa

As we celebrate this holiday season, I would like to share a story with you about a little magic that unfolded on the Appalachian Trail. George Masa, an early advocate for the AT, mapped most of its original sections in North Carolina and Tennessee. In recognition of his invaluable contributions, a North Carolina historic marker was dedicated in his honor in 2022.

On a chilly March morning, I unzipped my sleeping bag and emerged from my tent, greeted by subfreezing temperatures and the remnants of sleet from the night before. I couldn't help but marvel at my nephew Benji's proficiency in building fires — a skill honed in the snowy landscapes of Minnesota. Soon, I found comfort by the warm, crackling flames, savoring a steaming cup of hot chocolate. Our mission for the day was to prepare breakfast for the eagerly anticipated thru-hikers. I maintain this 2.5-mile stretch of the trail for the Carolina Mountain Club, and I wanted to share this unique experience with my nephew, who had devoted his college spring break to visiting me.

As expected, the old shelter, constructed in 1939 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the surrounding campsites were bustling with hikers. The inviting aroma of Benji's fire served as a signal, announcing that breakfast was underway. The previous evening, we had extended a warm invitation to all, and our offer was met with enthusiasm as hikers gathered around our fire to escape the morning chill. Benji swiftly set to work, whipping up blueberry, chocolate chip and banana pancakes to order. For thru-hikers, a morning campfire is a rare luxury, as they often must pack up quickly, and fires are restricted on much of the trail. A warm meal on a cold March morning was a cherished treat.

The Appalachian Trail draws a diverse range of individuals from various walks of life. Among them, we encountered a young couple who had diligently saved money by working at Walmart and sharing a home with the woman's mother for a year, all to embark on a well-earned five-month break from work. Meanwhile, two retirees were savoring their newfound freedom, eagerly anticipating a long-awaited reunion in Hot Springs with their wives, whom they hadn't seen in a month. An intrepid hiker in his late 60s was undertaking his second thru-hike, this time accompanied by his daughter. However, it was a young man on a personal journey of self-discovery who ecstatically exclaimed "Trail Magic!" when Benji handed him a steaming plate of blueberry pancakes.

"Trail Magic" is the term AT hikers use to describe acts of kindness received during their journey. Generous individuals along the AT offer food, water, rides into town and various forms of assistance. The smiles on the faces of our new friends and their hopeful requests for seconds, which Benji gladly fulfilled, confirmed the value of our campfire kitchen.

I felt immense pride in Benji's fire building and cooking skills, but I was even prouder of his selflessness, his willingness to give without expecting anything in return. A simple act of kindness, such as cooking for strangers on a chilly morning, allowed my nephew and me to share what we had with others.

As our fellow hikers bid their farewells, handing us their empty plates and expressing gratitude, I couldn't help but smile as I poured water, heated slowly over the fire, into a tub filled with dirty dishes. My nephew and I had shared a special camping trip, warmed by pancakes cooked over a fire on a cold mountain morning. Indeed, Trail Magic flows both ways.

The 90th anniversary of George Masa's passing was commemorated in 2023. A native of Japan, Masa played a pivotal role as an early member of the Carolina Mountain Club, which celebrated its centenary in 2023. His remarkable photographic work is credited with persuading John D.

Rockefeller Jr. to generously contribute millions of dollars towards the acquisition of the land that would eventually become Great Smoky Mountains National Park. With unwavering dedication, Masa would venture into the wilderness, lugging a cumbersome, large-format camera, patiently waiting entire days to capture the perfect shot, and immortalizing breathtaking scenes on film, establishing himself as a true master of his craft. His motto, "Less talk, more walk," epitomized his commitment to action.

Although Masa succumbed to tuberculosis in 1933, his legacy endures, especially at the 5,685-foot peak within Great Smoky Mountains National Park that proudly bears his name: Masa Knob.

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David Huff is Founding Chair of the George Masa Foundation.