

# Marching in Solidarity



By William P. Paine

**I**t was 10 at night as snow started falling on the south face of Droop Mountain. Or maybe it was closer to midnight. It didn't matter. Having walked for 20 miles or so already, time was trivial. There was no stopping until my long-distance destination was reached.

My feet, however, had my attention. They ached with every step I took up the mountainside.

Thankfully, I was not alone on this late night trek. Fourteen of us started from Lewisburg earlier that day as part of a Civil War memorial hike commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Droop Mountain. Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park Superintendent Mike Smith came up with the idea of staging four memorial hikes to commemorate the sesquicentennial anniversary of this important Civil War battle.

I was born in Bluefield, and I have always had an interest in Civil War history because my home state was created from the conflict. When I was growing up, books on the Civil War were ever present in our home. My great-grandfather, Capt. John Oliver Winslow Paine, fought for the Union with the 14th Maine. And it was well-known family lore that my

father, A. James Paine, took my mother, Bea Paine, to visit Civil War battle sites on their honeymoon.

The Battle of Droop Mountain took place in what is today West Virginia but what was then disputed land. This battle was where the Confederacy lost any hope of ever regaining the lands of western Virginia from the Federals.

The road the rebels traveled in 1863 under Brig. Gen. John Echols follows the same path as today's U.S. Route 219. On the afternoon of November 5, 2013, we hikers, in turn, followed the highway 27 miles from downtown Lewisburg to Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park. Ours was the last and longest of the memorial hikes.

The plan was to walk along a major highway through the mountains at night. This might seem a little dangerous, but since the memorial hike honors such brave men, we all figured a reasonable amount of danger was appropriate.

Just consider the rebel soldiers who walked the same path a century and a half before. They could have expected to fight immediately upon arrival at Droop. Some experienced hand-to-hand combat. All were routed and many were killed. Our small band faced possible cardiac arrest but no chance of mortal combat come daybreak.



**Braving heavy traffic along** Route 219, Droop Mountain Battle memorial hikers were rewarded with a memorable sunset early in their journey. © William P. Paine

As a nod to the boys in grey, I wore my cheapest work shoes because they look like something a rebel soldier might have worn. I figured to be as uncomfortable as those fellows were. I also wore all wool and cotton clothing and a fairly heavy pack, even though I didn't need it.

For the first five miles of our trek, traffic remained disconcertingly heavy. Trucks rushed past close to us and we had to sidestep some roadkill. But just a few miles from Lewisburg, we were afforded a view of the sunset, and there was less traffic and more time to get to know one another.

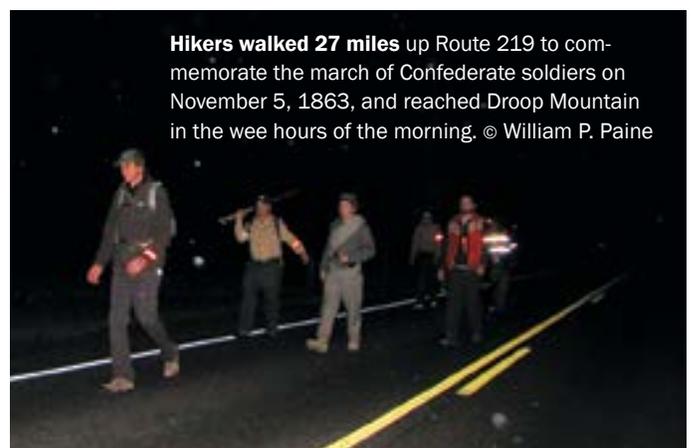
### Companions in Reenactment

Each memorial hiker shared the desire to honor those who marched into combat and possessed a common strain of fierce individualism. Nineteen-year-old Caleb Skaggs and his 17-year-old brother, Isaac, the only hikers dressed in authentic Confederate uniforms, marched in memory of their great-great-great-great-grandfather, Henry H. Skaggs. The elder Skaggs lost a leg at the Battle of Droop Mountain but survived to reenlist for the Confederate cause.

Father and son hikers Danny and Chad Morrison have three direct ancestors who fought for the Union at Droop and

lived to tell the tale. The wife of Christopher Quasebarth, a lawyer from Winchester, Virginia, is a direct descendent of one of the warriors of Droop Mountain, and that was a good enough reason for him to go.

Sixty-two-year-old J. Thompson of Danville, West Virginia, simply read about the event in a Charleston newspaper and decided to do it. Attorney Roger Forman from nearby Buckeye and Charleston, West Virginia, figured that the memorial hike to Droop would make for a memorable celebration of his 64th birthday.



**Hikers walked 27 miles** up Route 219 to commemorate the march of Confederate soldiers on November 5, 1863, and reached Droop Mountain in the wee hours of the morning. © William P. Paine

The only female hiker, Gayle Hyer of the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau, had already completed two of the three earlier Droop Mountain commemorative hikes. She approached the fourth and most strenuous one with her typically buoyant attitude.

John Dudley, a 44-year-old Air Force vet from Ohio wore his Cub Scout den leader's uniform and expressed his desire to promote patriotism. Dudley slaughters his own hogs so as not to expose his children to meats laden with chemicals.

Bill Jackson retired from the gas company and started his own small farm in Braxton County. He claims to have never touched a drop of alcohol in his life. Walter Kinsey came all the way from Nitro, West Virginia, to join the trek, but Geoff Hamill merely dropped in from nearby Marlinton.

I found park superintendent Mike Smith a unique and interesting person simply because of his long-term dedication to a lonely outpost of Civil War history. Smith moved to the top of Droop Mountain 29 years ago and never looked back. He doesn't drink either and never intends to.

## The Final Miles

Night fell for us (as it did for the Confederate army) well

before we reached Renick, the little town that marks the beginning of several climbs up toward the battle site. But we had it a lot better than the rebels. Kelly Smith, assistant superintendent of Watoga State Park, and Brian Puffenbarger, building maintenance mechanic at Droop Mountain State Park, materialized every three or four miles with a van full of snacks and even a port-a-john hooked to a trailer. When night fell, they made sure everyone had reflective gear and/or some type of lighted devise on their person.

I reached the high point of the trail, at Beartown State Park, before any of my fellow travelers. I was in good spirits. But the last five miles proved more difficult. As my blisters awakened and my backpack grew heavier, I began limping slightly as we approached the battlefield.

Mike Smith came to my rescue by telling stories about the historic march and the subsequent battle. Smith's extensive knowledge and easy-going style diverted my attention from my injured feet and aching back long enough for me to finish the hike.

We arrived at Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park at about 1:15 AM. No fanfare or audacious celebration greeted us, which seemed appropriate. After all, we weren't finish-



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(Next page) **From the lookout tower** at Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park, built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, visitors get a panoramic view of where the November 6, 1863, battle took place. © Clayton Spangler

▲ **Droop Mountain Battlefield State** Park Superintendent Mike Smith addresses attendees at the unveiling of a monument to soldiers who lost their lives in the battle. Photo by Steve Shaluta, West Virginia Department of Commerce

► **Reenactors honor Union and Confederate** soldiers who died in the Battle of Droop Mountain, as the new monument that lists their names is unveiled. Photo by Steve Shaluta, West Virginia Department of Commerce



ing a marathon; we were commemorating a march that led to extreme violence, one that pitted brother against brother and father against son. The original march led to death and eventual defeat for those who tread our same steps.

During the battle, the Confederates held their ground against the Union onslaught, until they were eventually routed by a brilliant, if not entirely unforeseen, flanking maneuver led by Col. Augustus Moor. Using the same road from which they came, the rebels retreated headlong back to Lewisburg, with Union Gen. William W. Averell's forces in hot pursuit.

Fortunately for us, arrival at the battle site was the end of our journey. We posed for a picture and felt good about what we'd done, knowing all the while that our little jaunt couldn't compare with the dread-filled hike to the battle 150 years ago.

### The Commemoration Continues ...

On the afternoon of November 6, the day the Battle of Droop Mountain occurred in 1863, Mike Smith unveiled a 12-foot-tall sandstone monument with the names of all who fell that day, Yankee or rebel, inscribed at its base. Civil War reenactors dressed in blue and grey stood at attention as the names of the fallen soldiers were read aloud, likely for the first time in history.

Terry Lowry, author of *The Last Sleep*, was one of several

notable attendees who read the names of the fallen. For 13 years Mike Smith helped Lowry gather information for *The Last Sleep*, which is likely the most comprehensive history ever written about the Battle of Droop Mountain.

Although the 2013 federal government shutdown occurred just a couple weeks before this experience, nobody mentioned it. Privately, I considered that if all government were as well run as West Virginia State Parks, we'd all be better off. In my opinion, Mike Smith is an example of a typical West Virginia State Parks employee: professional and completely knowledgeable about his park. He and his wife, Christine, even graciously hosted all who stayed through the night, waiting for the next day's unveiling.

What, you might ask, did I accomplish on the hike? I have to admit, I'm not quite sure. But if I had marched almost 30 miles to take a bullet defending hearth and home, it would be nice to know that somebody took note of that 150 years later.

So I remembered the rebels' unhappy march by experiencing just a little bit of what they went through. And I've got the blisters on my feet to prove it. 🍌

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