

Seven Decades Strong THE KANAWHA TRAIL CLUB

By Colleen Anderson

One Sunday in the fall of 2012, I joined about 15 hikers who were heading out for their weekly walk. I'd heard of the Kanawha Trail Club, and even encountered the group once or twice while walking alone. I didn't realize, though, that I would soon count myself among a fellowship with such a rich history. Here's their story:

A cluster of honey mushrooms accents a trail in the Trace Fork Gorge in South Charleston, a regular hiking destination for the Kanawha Trail Club. © Clayton Spangler



Wartime Walkers

Sunday, July 26, 1942: the *Charleston Daily Mail's* banner headline was grim: "NAZIS IN ROSTOV SUBURBS." The city had recently observed "the quietest Independence Day in history," as Charlestonians were urged to "let our men in the armed forces shoot off our fireworks." Folks were buying war bonds and collecting scrap metal, rubber, and even cooking fats (used in the production of explosives) for the war effort.

Yet life went on. And if you were looking for diversions in Charleston that Sunday, you had choices. You could listen to "Uncle Don" read the Sunday comics over WCHS Radio, see *The Magnificent Dope* at the Kearsse, or hear the Garnet High School Band play a free concert on the levee.

Or you could take a walk with the brand-new *Daily Mail* Hiking Club.

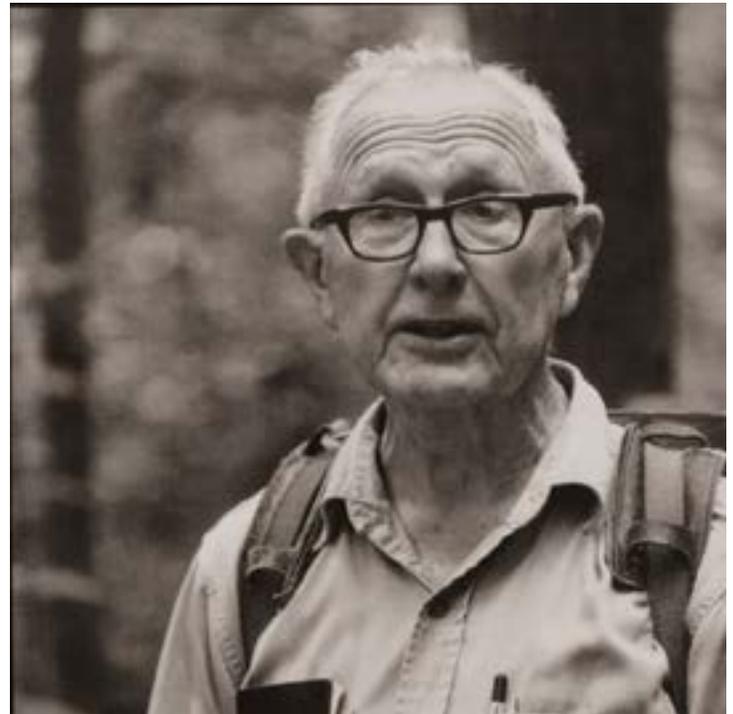
Sol Padlibsky, the *Charleston Daily Mail* reporter who hatched the idea for the club, wasn't a hiker himself. He wrote that he was inspired by "the gradual curtailment of automotive equipment and Uncle Sam's plea to his millions of nephews and nieces to keep fit to further the war effort." He must have reasoned, also, that Sunday walks would be a good way for newcomers to get acquainted. And Charleston was chock-full of newcomers, many employed by Union Carbide in war production jobs.

Padlibsky found the ideal collaborator in M. H. F. Kinsey, the executive director of the Boy Scouts Buckskin Council. Kinsey had organized what was probably the first hiking club in West Virginia in 1925. His Appalachian Trail Blazers, made up mostly of his own scouts, tackled ambitious treks, typically covering 20 miles or more.

A Trail Blazers alumnus, Bill Rippetoe, led the first *Daily*

(Below) **A key member of the Kanawha Trail Club**, Charley Carlson led hikes throughout the state and served 10 terms as president. Photo courtesy of the Kanawha Trail Club

(Bottom left) **Longtime Kanawha Trail Club member** Norma Levy (third from left) keeps a scrapbook of trail club photos and other memorabilia. She took her first hike with the club in 1958 in Kanawha State Forest. Courtesy of Norma Levy



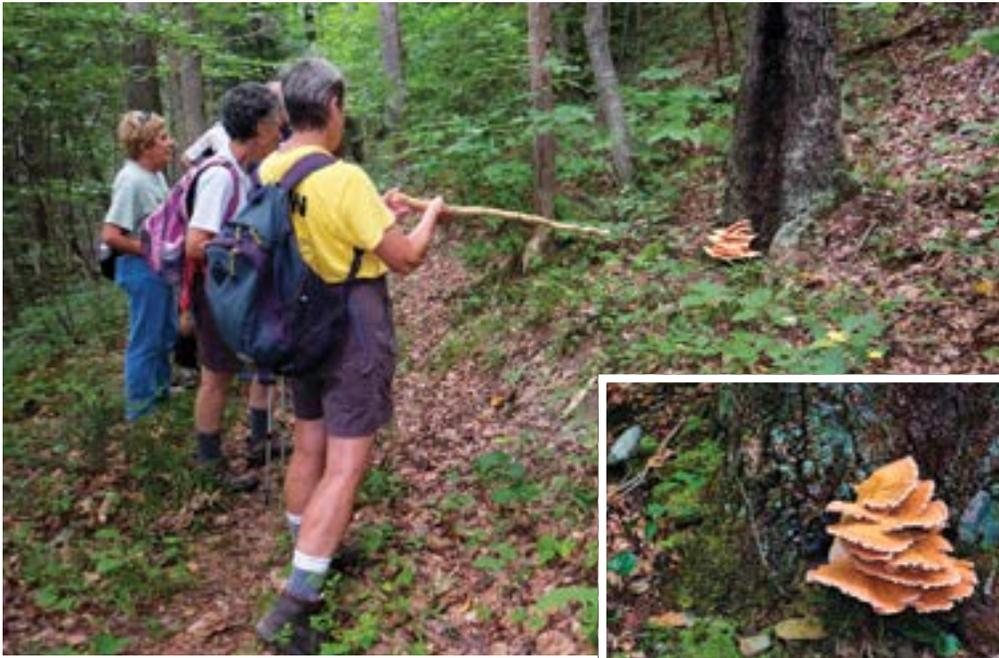
Mail hike, a three-mile walk up Mission Hollow. Thirty-five people showed up for the excursion.

The first year was rough. In a brief history, club member Harry "King" Cole summarized it: "Mud, heat, briers, and lack of plan made some trips too long and difficult and others too easy. During the winter they were almost abandoned." But the spring of 1943 brought warmth and wildflowers. The group rallied.

By 1944, the informal club had more than 50 members. One of the original members, Bob Craver, later told a *Charleston Daily Mail* reporter, "We just met each each Sunday and went. It wasn't organized, and I don't think there was even a count."

In 1945, they renamed themselves the Kanawha Trail Club. Chartered as a corporation in 1947, the club held its first overnight outing that year—a Memorial Day weekend excursion to Babcock State Park. In December, the group published its first handbook, which included a full schedule of hikes and social events for 1948, along with this mission statement: "To bring in mutual cooperation persons interested in hiking. To develop an appreciation of the natural beauties of the out-of-doors, to foster the preservation and extension of them, and to furnish such other recreation as may seem desirable."





◀ **Hike leader Lois Ludwig** uses her walking stick to point out chicken of the woods fungi growing at the base of a tree in the Trace Fork Gorge.
© Clayton Spangler



▼ **Kanawha Trail Club member Alan Rada** crosses a creek in the Trace Fork Gorge. Club members enjoy close-up views of creek features like Bear Paw Rock, created by years of erosion.
© Clayton Spangler

By the late 1940s, the group had built a lodge just outside the Kanawha State Forest boundary. The war was over, and a gathering of strangers had become a fellowship.

Blazing and Building

The birth of the trail club coincided with the closing, in June 1942, of Camp Kanawha, a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp in what was to become Kanawha State Forest. The huge tract of protected public land was an invitation to explore—and, for many years, the club's hikes were nearly all in Kanawha State Forest. George Daniels, who joined in 1945, remembers drawing the first trail map.

Longtime member Clarence Aleshire says, “Most of the trails were built by the Kanawha Trail Club, and we maintained them for years. Generally, along about April, we’d go through. Any fallen trees, we’d clear them out.”

Shirley Coles remembers, “We’d sometimes have work hikes on Saturdays, once or twice a month. We brought our clippers and kept the trails in shape. The men sometimes would bring chainsaws.”

Louise Martin says, “My dad blazed the trail for Alligator Rock. He blazed Lindy Trail.” She remembers waiting with



her father, Burton Martin, to meet others at a downtown bus stop before her first trail club hike, when she was seven.

“A lot of people who played key roles in the West Virginia Scenic Trails Association were old-time members of the Kanawha Trail Club,” says Carl McLaughlin. Trail club members have assisted with Scenic Trails Association projects, including the creation of the 330-mile Allegheny Trail.

From 1973 to 1997, the Kanawha Trail Club maintained a section of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. McLaughlin, who was part of that volunteer crew, says, “Basically, it was on top of Peters Mountain, the dividing line between Monroe County [West Virginia] and Giles County [Virginia]. They



◀ **The Kanawha Trail Club** lodge, built on the outskirts of Kanawha State Forest in the late 1940s, is still the center of many club activities.
© Clayton Spangler (Vintage inset photo courtesy of Norma Levy)

(Next page) **Lois Ludwig leads hikers** down an incline in the Trace Fork Gorge. © Clayton Spangler

say the only part of the Appalachian Trail in West Virginia is at Harpers Ferry, but when you're on that ridge, sometimes you're looking down into Virginia, sometimes down into West Virginia."

Club members helped construct a shelter on top of that ridge and, collaboratively, the two West Virginia groups built the two-mile Groundhog Trail in Monroe County, the only access to the Appalachian Trail from southern West Virginia.

Fellowship and Fun

The early Kanawha Trail Club was at least as much a social organization as a hiking group. In addition to monthly cookouts and other gatherings at the lodge, members enjoyed twice-yearly weekend outings, one in West Virginia and one out of state. Most of these traditions, including the weekend getaways, continue today.

For some years, the club sponsored at least two weekly walks. According to Dorothy Dixon, who served as president during the early 1970s, "Sunday afternoon was more strenuous. Saturday was for the less able. We even had night hikes; we went out listening for owls."

"We always had an annual meeting and cookout in September," Edna King remembers, "and corned beef and cabbage on New Year's Day." There was an annual Christmas party and a formal spring dinner.

"We had swimming parties at Lake Chaweva," says Norma Levy. "We had a lot of parties at the lodge, and we dressed up for Halloween. We played lots of games and swam in the pond near the lodge. During one period, everybody started getting married. We were a close-knit group. It was a happy crowd in my day."

Always at the center of the crowd was Charles "Charley" Carlson. "Charley knew every flower, every tree, every bush," Shirley Coles says. "He knew the forest backward and forward." A self-taught naturalist and talented photographer, Carlson led wildflower hikes throughout West Virginia.

Those who remember him invariably comment on Carlson's easygoing nature, humor, and generosity. They recall that he loved the game of bridge, played the harmonica, and was famous for making pancakes at the lodge.

Carlson's dedication to the Kanawha Trail Club was serious. Between 1945 and 1975, he served 10 terms as president. "Charley Carlson is the key to the Kanawha Trail Club," says George Daniels. And, according to longtime hiker Flossie Kourey, "Charley Carlson kept the club together during the lean years."

Strong years followed the lean ones. Stories of memorable hikes abound. Many older members recall the time Bob Craver lagged behind, fell, lost his glasses, and spent an uncomfortable night outdoors. Dorothy Dixon remembers a near-disastrous crossing of the New River, when water was released without warning from an upstream dam: "You never saw a bunch of old ladies scramble up a bank so fast." George Daniels wishes he could forget that two of his children infected many of their fellow hikers with flu on one fall outing.

Names recur in many of the stories—among them Margaret Bouchard, Dr. Arla C. "Doc" Dixon, Emerson "Buzz" Edwards, "Let's-get-lost" John Holsclaw, and Jack Snyder.

"At one time we had about 200 members," Clarence Aleshire says. In 1982, at least 80 people attended a 40th reunion banquet at the University of Charleston. A similarly

large crowd gathered for the 50th anniversary in 1992, and Governor Gaston Caperton officially proclaimed July 10 as Kanawha Trail Club Day.

The Trail Ahead

Today's club is smaller, but it's not unusual for 20 or more people to hike together. Camaraderie is still an important part of every Kanawha Trail Club excursion, and hikers sometimes choose to have supper together after their hike. "We are a diverse group," Roger Hardway says, "but we have two interests in common: walking and food."

The all-volunteer club is more organized than in the early days, with a website that includes descriptions of upcoming hikes, as well as many photos of past hikes. Kanawha State Forest remains a popular destination, but hikes take place all over West Virginia and sometimes in contiguous states.

The group continues its semiannual weekend outings, Christmas parties, and New Year's Day feasts. A newer tradition is a wintertime soup hike based at the lodge; everyone brings a favorite soup in a crockpot, and a delicious soup sampling follows the walk.

In addition to enjoying one another's company, club members educate one another about wildflowers, trees, and birds; a number of members have participated in West Virginia's Master Naturalist program.

Almost every member recalls his or her first hike, and most credit an older or former member for encouraging them.

Current president Kathy Hastings remembers that Clarence and Shirley Aleshire led her first hike. Carl McLaughlin says, "Jack Snyder was one of my mentors in hiking. He would take me out and show me trails, and then I started leading hikes."

Lois Ludwig, another frequent hike leader, has inspired me. She has hiked the entire Appalachian Trail and the Allegheny Trail, as well as hiking in the Peruvian Andes and throughout the United States. At 72, she regularly walks 10 or more miles in a day. When I told her that my motivation for joining the club was to avoid getting lost, she replied, "I love getting lost. It's fun to figure out where you are and how to get back on the trail. Hiking is a mental thing as well as a physical thing."

I'll never be the hiker Lois is, but I'm hooked on the benefits of hiking as well as the fun of walking with a group of friendly people—particularly one that has weathered the decades so well. Like Kathy Hastings, I'm already looking forward to 2017.

"I would like to see a new group of dedicated hikers," she says. "I would like to see a really great 75th anniversary."

For more information about the Kanawha Trail Club, including a schedule of upcoming hikes, visit kanawhatrailclub.org. 🌿

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