

In the spring of 1955, 67-year-old Emma Gatewood walked the entire length of the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail, a public hiking trail that extends from Georgia to Maine. Read the excerpt from an account of her walk, and answer the questions that follow.

GRANDMA GATEWOOD'S WALK

by Ben Montgomery



- 1 She packed her things in late spring, when her flowers were in full bloom, and left Gallia County, Ohio, the only place she'd ever really called home.
- 2 She caught a ride to Charleston, West Virginia, then boarded a bus to the airport, then a plane to Atlanta, then a bus from there to a little picture-postcard spot called Jasper, Georgia, "the First Mountain Town." Now here she was in Dixieland, five hundred miles from her Ohio home, listening to the rattle and ping in the back of a taxicab, finally making her ascent up the mountain called Oglethorpe, her ears popping, the cabbie grumbling about how he wasn't going to make a penny driving her all this way. She sat quiet, still, watching through the window as miles of Georgia blurred past.

3 They hit a steep incline, a narrow gravel road, and made it within a quarter mile of the top
of the mountain before the driver killed the engine.

4 She collected her supplies and handed him five dollars, then one extra for his trouble. That
cheered him up. And then he was gone, taillights and dust, and Emma Gatewood stood alone,
an old woman on a mountain.

5 Her clothes were stuffed inside a pasteboard box and she lugged it up the road to the
summit, a few minutes away by foot. She changed in the woods, slipping on her dungarees
and tennis shoes and discarding the simple dress and slippers she'd worn during her travels.
She pulled from the box a drawstring sack she'd made back home from a yard of denim, her
wrinkled fingers doing the stitching, and opened it wide. She filled the sack with other items
from the box: Vienna Sausage, raisins, peanuts, bouillon cubes, powdered milk. She tucked
inside a tin of Band-Aids, a bottle of iodine, some bobby pins, and a jar of Vicks salve. She
packed the slippers and a gingham dress that she could shake out if she ever needed to look
nice. She stuffed in a warm coat, a shower curtain to keep the rain off, some drinking water, a
Swiss Army knife, a flashlight, candy mints, and her pen and a little Royal Vernon Line memo
book that she had bought for twenty-five cents at Murphy's back home.

6 She threw the pasteboard box into a chicken house nearby, cinched the sack closed, and
slung it over one shoulder.

7 She stood, finally, her canvas Keds tied tight, on May 3, 1955, atop the southern terminus
of the Appalachian Trail, the longest continuous footpath in the world, facing the peaks on
the blue-black horizon that stretched toward heaven and unfurled before her for days. Facing
a mean landscape of angry rivers and hateful rock she stood, a woman, mother of eleven and
grandmother of twenty-three. She had not been able to get the trail out of her mind. She had
thought of it constantly back home in Ohio, where she tended her small garden and looked after
her grandchildren, biding her time until she could get away.

8 When she finally could, it was 1955, and she was sixty-seven years old.

9 She stood five foot two and weighed 150 pounds and the only survival training she had
were lessons learned earning calluses on her farm. She had a mouth full of false teeth and
bunions the size of prize marbles. She had no map, no sleeping bag, no tent. She was blind
without her glasses, and she was utterly unprepared if she faced the wrath of a snowstorm, not
all that rare on the trail. Five years before, a freezing Thanksgiving downpour killed more than
three hundred in Appalachia, and most of them had houses. Their bones were buried on these
hillsides.

10 She had prepared for her trek the only way she knew how. The year before, she worked at a
nursing home and tucked away what she could of her twenty-five-dollar-a-week paycheck until
she finally earned enough quarters to draw the minimum in social security: fifty-two dollars a
month. She had started walking in January while living with her son Nelson in Dayton, Ohio.
She began walking around the block, and extended it a little more each time until she was
satisfied by the burn she felt in her legs. By April she was hiking ten miles a day.

11 Before her, now, grew an amazing sweep of elms, chestnuts, hemlocks, dogwoods, spruces,
firs, mountain ashes, and sugar maples. She'd see crystal-clear streams and raging rivers and
vistas that would steal her breath.

12 Before her stood mountains, more than three hundred of them topping five thousand feet, the ancient remnants of a range that hundreds of millions of years before pierced the clouds and rivaled the Himalayas in their majesty. The Unakas, the Smokies, Cheoahs, Nantahalas. The long, sloping Blue Ridge; the Kittatinny Mountains; the Hudson Highlands. The Taconic Ridge and the Berkshires, the Green Mountains, the White Mountains, the Mahoosuc Range. Saddleback, Bigelow, and finally—five million steps away—Katahdin.

13 And between here and there: a bouquet of ways to die.

14 Between here and there lurked wild boars, black bears, wolves, bobcats, coyotes, . . . poison oak, poison ivy, and poison sumac. Anthills and black flies and deer ticks and rabid skunks, squirrels, and raccoons. And snakes. Black snakes, water moccasins, and copperheads. And rattlers; the young man who hiked the trail four years before told the newspapers he'd killed at least fifteen.

15 There were a million heavenly things to see and a million spectacular ways to die.

16 Two people knew Emma Gatewood was here: the cabdriver and her cousin, Myrtle Trowbridge, with whom she had stayed the night before in Atlanta. She had told her children she was going on a walk. That was no lie. She just never finished her sentence, never offered her own offspring the astonishing, impossible particulars.

17 All eleven of them were grown, anyhow, and independent. They had their own children to raise and bills to pay and lawns to mow, the price of participation in the great, immobile American dream.

18 She was past all that. She'd send a postcard.

19 If she told them what she was attempting to do, she knew they'd ask *Why?* That's a question she'd face day and night in the coming months, as word of her hike spread like fire through the valleys, as newspaper reporters learned of her mission and intercepted her along the trail. It was a question she'd playfully brush off every time they asked. And *how* they'd ask. Groucho Marx would ask. Dave Garroway would ask. *Sports Illustrated* would ask. The Associated Press would ask. The United States Congress would ask.

20 *Why?* Because it was there, she'd say. Seemed like a good lark, she'd say.

21 She'd never betray the real reason. . . . She'd tell them she was a widow. Yes. She'd tell them she found solace in nature, away from the grit and ash of civilization. She'd tell them that her father always told her, "Pick up your feet," and that, through rain and snow, through the valley of the shadow of death, she was following his instruction.