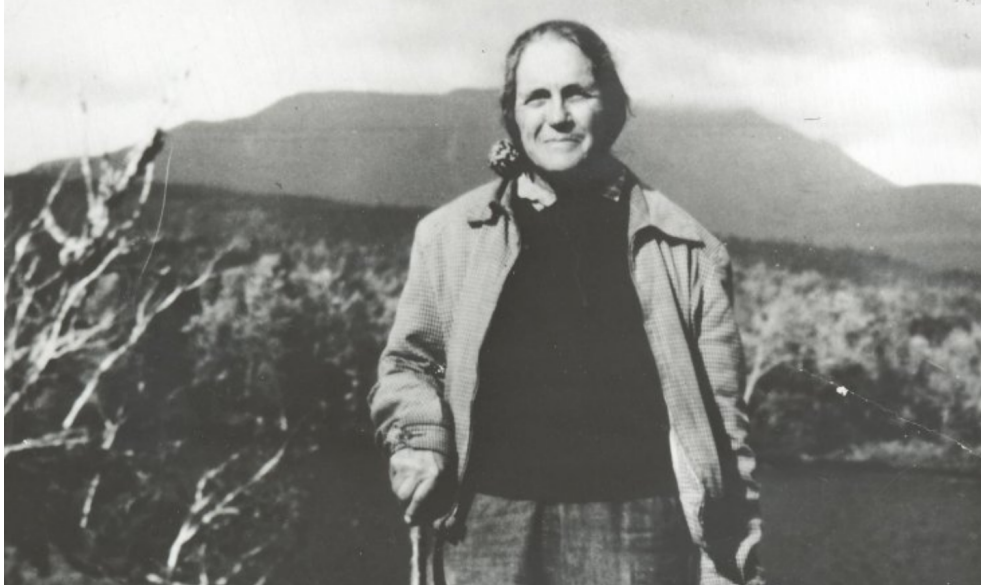


The great-grandma who changed the AT forever



Gatewood during her first successful trip on the AT in 1955. Photo/Appalachian Trail Conservancy

By Cass Buggé, Outside

In May 1955, when 67-year-old great-grandmother Emma Gatewood told her children that she was “going for a hike in the woods,” she left out a few important details. Like the fact that she was heading 470 miles from her Ohio hometown to Mount Oglethorpe, Georgia, writes reporter Ben Montgomery in his 2016 book, *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk*. And the fact that this “hike” was the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail, and Gatewood’s intention was to become the first woman to solo thru-hike the whole thing.

Born in 1887, in the 2,000-person community of Mercerville, Ohio, Gatewood lived a life tied to the outdoors. A childhood defined by physical labor on her family’s farm gave way to an early marriage—at age 19—to Percy Gatewood, who allegedly physically abused her. As Montgomery writes, “They were

married three months before he drew blood.” A walk in the woods behind her home often served as her only respite during her most trying times. After 33 years together, in 1940, Gatewood managed to get a divorce—almost unheard of at the time—and raised the last three of her 11 children on her own.

At some point in the 1950s, with all her children grown and out of the house, Gatewood was reading a 1949 *National Geographic* article about Earl Shaffer, the first man to through-hike the AT. As Gatewood’s daughter Rowena later told it, her mother finished the piece and thought to herself, “If those men can do it, I can do it.”

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