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Grandma Gatewood survived domestic violence to walk the Appalachian Trail alone at 67



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By **Diana Reese** January 5 at 2:12 PM

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Even now, six decades later, Emma Gatewood's story still resonates.

Emma Gatewood escaped an abusive marriage and became the first woman to hike the Appalachian Trail solo. (Photo courtesy of Ben Montgomery from Gatewood family collection)

Grandma Gatewood, as she became known, was the [first woman](#) to hike the entire 2,050 miles of the Appalachian Trail by herself in 1955.

She was 67 years old at the time, a mother of 11 and grandmother of 23. She'd survived more than 30 years of marriage to a brutal husband who beat her repeatedly.

Gatewood hiked the trail carrying a homemade knapsack and wearing ordinary sneakers — she wore out six pairs of them in 146 days from May to September. She brought a blanket and a plastic shower curtain to protect her from

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the elements, but she didn't bother with a sleeping bag, a tent, a compass or even a map, instead relying on the hospitality of strangers along the way and her own independent resourcefulness. She'd sleep in a front porch swing, under a picnic table or on a bed of leaves when necessary, and she ate canned Vienna sausages, raisins and peanuts plus greens she found on the trail and meals offered by strangers.

Her story, as author Ben Montgomery describes it, is one of "overcoming hardship and finding yourself and finding peace."

Montgomery, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and reporter for the Tampa Bay Times, [wrote](#) "[Grandma Gatewood's Walk](#): The Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail." Published in April 2014, the book made the New York Times bestsellers list last August.

Interest in Gatewood continues. In the works is a [documentary](#), "[Trail Magic](#)," that will premiere May 29 in Sheffield Village, Ohio. The program will be shown on PBS in Toledo, Ohio to mark the 60th anniversary of Gatewood's first hike on the Appalachian Trail.

"Everyone who hikes the trail sooner or later becomes aware of the grandma who hiked," said Peter Huston, the director of "Trail Magic." Her story, though, "is a lot more complex and interesting" than people realize.

Bette Lou Higgins, artistic director of Eden Valley Enterprises, is producing the documentary. She became interested in Gatewood after being asked to do the voice-over for a history project in 2009. The few lines

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about Ohio native Gatewood piqued Higgins's curiosity. That led to the Grandma Gatewood project, which includes a [storytelling program](#) and [a play](#).

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"Emma Gatewood is a person who deserves not to be forgotten," Montgomery told me.

Her story doesn't stop with that first hike. Gatewood returned to thru-hike (hiking straight through in less than 12 months) again in 1957, making her the first person, male or female, to successfully tackle the Appalachian Trail twice. Gatewood said the second time was so she could enjoy it. She completed the trail again in 1964, doing it in sections, becoming the first to hike it three times.

In 1959 she headed west, walking from Independence, Mo. to Portland, Ore. as part of the Oregon Centennial celebration. She left two weeks after a wagon train, but passed it in Idaho. The trip covered nearly 2,000 miles and took 95 days.

She was instrumental in establishing the [Buckeye Trail](#) in her home state of Ohio. It began with a 20-mile stretch in 1959 and has since grown to more than 1,444 miles; one section is named after her. She died in 1973 at the age of 85.

Why, though, is the question everyone has asked, starting with the first reporters who interviewed Gatewood as she hiked the Appalachian Trail.

Why did this 67-year-old woman decide to take a 2,000 mile walk through 14 states, risking exposure to rattlesnakes, bears, flooded creeks and slippery mountain

slopes?

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Montgomery offers his theories in his book. Gatewood was his mother's great-aunt, and he said he grew up falling asleep "to tales about this adventurous grandma." During his research, he met with Gatewood's three surviving children, who handed over boxes of their mother's diaries, trail journals, letters and other memorabilia.

The book he wrote is really two stories: the tale of Gatewood's first hike, which reads like a page-turning adventure, and the biography of her life, one of struggle and hardship and perseverance.

"It's not an Appalachian Trail book," he said. "It's the story of a remarkable woman."

Emma Rowena Caldwell was born in 1887 on an Ohio farm, one of 15 children, the daughter of a disabled Civil War veteran. She traded the hard life of the farm for marriage at age 19 to Percy Gatewood, but life didn't get any easier.

For more than 30 years, "she put up with being married to a stubborn, ignorant, hard-fisted man who beat her over and over again," Montgomery said.

Then one night he broke her teeth and cracked a rib, nearly killing her. A sheriff's deputy arrived at the house, and arrested Emma, not Percy. She spent a night in jail until the mayor of the small West Virginia town where they lived intervened when he saw her blackened eyes and bloodied face.

She managed to get a divorce — unheard of in those days — and raised her last three children alone.

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Sometime in the 1950s she saw a “National Geographic” magazine article about the Appalachian Trail. Her daughter, Lucy Gatewood Seeds, has said in interviews she believes the fact that no woman had yet hiked the trail presented a challenge to her mother. An obituary quoted daughter Rowena saying her mother stated, “If those men can do it, I can do it.”

Gatewood attempted the trail in 1954, starting in Maine, but broke her glasses and gave up, determined to try again. She did the following spring.

The article had painted a much rosier picture than the reality of the trail. “I would never have started this trip if I had known how tough it was, but I couldn’t and I wouldn’t quit,” Gatewood told a reporter from “Sports Illustrated” magazine. Media coverage of her hike led to repairs and restoration of the trail and may, indeed, have saved the trail from falling into ruin. It also inspired a new crop of hikers.

She gave different reporters different answers when asked why she was hiking the trail. But those reporters believed they were talking to a widow; that’s how Gatewood described herself. They didn’t know the awful story of her marriage. They didn’t realize she was what we’d now call a survivor of domestic violence.

“She was alone, she was free,” said Higgins. “She didn’t have to answer to anyone.”

Montgomery puts it this way: “I’m not sure she was walking toward something so much as she was walking away.”

I think he captures Gatewood’s mood when he quotes what she said to one reporter about why she did it. “Because I wanted to.”

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Diana Reese is a journalist in Overland Park, Kan.
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