

Nimblewill Nomad
Transcript - Keynote Address
Alabama Hiking Trail Society
10th Annual Conference - February 26, 2011
Monte Sano State Park, Huntsville, AL

Thanks, Erik (AHTS President), for the introduction, thanks so much; and to our hosts here at Monte Sano State Park, just a spectacular setting for our conference, thanks!

Folks, with me here this evening, and performing for you during this program—Jan *Dutch Treat* Benschop. Thanks for doing this one more time, Jan!

What a joy to be back again with so many dear friends here in the south, for this the tenth anniversary of our great organization—and to be here as keynote speaker, just a great honor, thanks!

I'm very proud to be a founding member of Alabama Hiking Trail Society, to have been involved during the early, crucial, seminal stages. Our great organization has come far in just the short span of ten years. For that success, tribute needs be given to many. However, the one individual who was there from the very beginning, when the going was really tough, and who's remained faithful and steadfast to the task ever since, that person is Rick Guhsé. Without his determination, drive, dedication, no way the Alabama Hiking Trail Society would exist today.

During my northbound trek back in 1998, o'er that long trail that's since come to be known as the Eastern Continental Trail, I had the good fortune of getting to know Rick. At the time, he was well into his own personal goal of hiking the Florida National Scenic Trail. *Vagabond Rick*, as he's come to be known on the trail, was not only knowledgeable as an active Florida Trail Association volunteer, but as a hiker, he also knew the trail from the ground up. Without Rick's help I could not have successfully hiked the breadth of Florida that year, the year of El Niño.

As I trekked north, out of Florida, along the Pinhoti Trail through Alabama, I chanced to meet Jay Hudson. That was in March of 1998. At the time, Jay was a director of the Alabama Trails Association. During that meeting I learned much from Jay. He explained the goal of the Alabama Trails Association, that their total focus was on trail construction leading to the Georgia line on Flagpole Mountain, the completion of that link needed in northeastern Alabama to connect the then Alabama Pinhoti Trail to the Georgia Pinhoti Trail, and thus, via the Benton MacKaye Trail, to the Appalachian Trail on Springer Mountain.

The concept of a trail extending near the breadth of the entire eastern North American continent struck a chord and set a passion in the hearts of certain intrepid. One such free spirit was none other than *Vagabond Rick*. The realization that it was not only possible, but indeed plausible, to connect the Florida Trail to the Appalachian Trail, kindled an absolute fire in the man. After his successful trek through Florida, *Vagabond Rick* continued on north, into Alabama, along the Sunshine Trail, a Florida Trail connector then under construction in the western Florida Panhandle.

As *Vagabond Rick* trekked Alabama, he met and interacted with many people here. In his journey north, he came to the realization, as did I after meeting and talking with Jay, that the Alabama Trails Association would not be working trail south of Porter Gap, the then southern terminus of the Alabama Pinhoti Trail—a disappointment for sure. However, also at the same time came another realization—that there were plenty of folks in Alabama who were interested in taking the Pinhoti on south. And so, the impasse—in order for the dream to take form, that of connecting the Alabama Pinhoti Trail to the Florida Trail, it became obvious there was a need for a state-wide organization within Alabama to take on that task. Thus began that struggle, the difficult, slow, beginning for a small group of folks who shared that grand vision—and so, the occurred the birth of this organization, the group of folks known as the Alabama Hiking Trail Society. Ah, and as they say, “The rest is history!”

With Alabama Trails Association’s successful completion of the Pinhoti to the Georgia line, to connect with the Georgia Pinhoti and the Benton MacKaye, and ultimately, the Appalachian Trail, and with the recent extension of the Pinhoti south to Flag Mountain, this by the Alabama Hiking Trail Society, it is now possible to hike the entire southern extent of the Appalachian Mountain Range.

Okay, I’m gonna swerve off here for just a moment folks. Gotta get this in—a ditty inspired as I journey north through your majestic southern Appalachians:

“A well-kept secret known to few,
Where the folks say suh and mahm.
Are the ancient Appalachians,
Down south in Alabam’.
Straight from the start, they were set apart,
From the rest of their far-flung kin.
And throughout time in this southern clime,
They never quite fit in.
But here they sit, to the spite of it,
Majestic, proud and free.
And I would rate my hike here a great...
Grand part of this Odyssey.
You can roam all o'er that famous trail,
From Baxter to Springer Mount.
But you'll wind up short and to no avail,
When it's down to the final count.
So, come feast your eyes where these mountains rise,
Where this magic all began.
A well-kept secret known to few...
Down south in Alabam’.”
[N. Nomad]

Today, work continues in the effort to close the gap between the Pinhoti Trail and the Florida Trail, to end the longest remaining roadwalk along the Eastern Continental Trail. Thus, *Vagabond Rick*’s dream, *Nimblewill*’s dream, and the dream of many others, that dream is becoming reality!

In the first paragraph of the beautiful new brochure created by Alabama Hiking Trail Society are these words: (quote) And in the incredibly detailed *Hiking Alabama – A Guide to Alabama’s Greatest Hiking*

Adventures, written by our very own Joe Cuhaj, is this statement about the Eastern Continental Trail: (quote)

Here in America, in addition to the Eastern Continental Trail, another trail has emerged, the Sea-to-Sea Route. Both of these trails are amalgams, created by connecting existing long trails. They're unofficial, yet do they exist, spanning great distances, the Eastern Continental, nearly 6,000 miles, the Sea-to-Sea, over 8,000. So happens, these two trails interconnect, making it possible to hike not only seven of our eleven National Scenic Trails, but also 29 of our lower 48 states. Folks, can you feel the energy in this? There is incredible excitement and energy in this; I know, because I've hiked the Eastern Continental Trail (twice). I've hiked the Sea-to-Sea Route—those seven National Scenic Trails, and the 29 states. Can you see how that fire in the gut of those intrepid among us can quickly erupt, how that passion to pick up and go can get to burning! Thank you, *Vagabond Rick*, for keeping the passion, for never losing focus on that far-reaching and remarkable vision—thanks!

So, folks, I want to speak to you this evening about that wonder, that magic, that lure, the beauty that is—our National Scenic Trails. As I've mentioned, there are now eleven of them, the Appalachian Trail, certainly it's the most well-known and most hiked of them all. Ah, and among us here this evening are folks who've hike the Appalachian Trail. If you don't mind, would you please raise your hands. Oh yes, hello *Sheltowee*, hello *Waterfall*, hello *Mother Natures Son*, hello *JoJo* and *Nomad '98*, hello all dear friends who've trekked the Appalachian Trail (close to ten in all were present).

Three of the first of our now eleven National Scenic Trails, the Appalachian, the Pacific Crest, and the Continental Divide, these three trails have come to be known collectively as the Triple Crown. Where thousands have successfully hiked the Appalachian Trail, those who've trekked the Triple Crown, number only in the hundreds. And in your presence here, folks, are Triple Crowners! One of our very own trail volunteers right here in Alabama—John, *Mother Natures Son*, John Calhoun, and Jolene *JoJo Smiley Burley*!

Okay, so now, time for a little bit of the old *Nomad's Poison*. *Vagabond Rick*, others of you here know what's coming. Be forewarned, for once you've gotten a dose of *Nomad's Poison*, future life for you will never be the same again. Let me set you up for this with a quote I've lifted from Sigurd Olson, guide to the Boundary Waters and Quetico, one of the great naturalists/nature writers of the 20th Century: "I thought as I sat there this was the quiet we knew in our distant past, when it was part of our minds and spirits. We had not forgotten and never will, though the scream and roar of jet engines, the grinding vibrations of cities, and the constant bombardment of electronic noise may seem to have blunted our senses forever. We can live with such clamor, it is true, but we pay a price and do so at our peril. The loss of quiet in our lives is one of the great tragedies of civilization, and to have known even for a moment the silence of the wilderness is one of our most precious memories."

Our National Scenic Trails offer not only the quiet and solitude Sigurd speaks of, but also, do they offer the most awe inspiring, spectacular beauty Ma Nature has to offer. Sad but true, that we who dance to Ma Nature's song are thought insane by those who cannot hear the music. And to hear her music, that quietness, literally, that quietness has got to soak into our bones. Through her music, Ma Nature's song, through this incredible medium of quietness, might we come to hear the voice of God. You see, folks, it is in the quiet bosom of Nature that we are truly in God's presence. So, for me, to trek our National Scenic Trails, is there constantly offered up this most glorious gift. When we're with Ma Nature, when we're within her realm, yet, and still in the world of here and now, we are ever the closest to Heaven on Earth—as in the words of that old, timeless, classic hymn—"Just a Closer Walk With Thee."

Along our National Scenic Trails I find these quiet places most often to be the high ground, those lofty crags that have been considered sacred to Native Americans for centuries. Especially are such quiet, spiritual places to be found along the trails of the Triple Crown. On the Appalachian there is Mount Katahdin. Sacred ground can be found along most the entire Continental Divide. The Sierra Nevada, crags o'er which the Pacific Crest Trail passes, and since the days of John Muir, those spectacular mountains have been known as The Range of Light. Let me share with you this inspiration from Odyssey '02, my prayer on the trail:

Here! A bright new day doth beckon.
Now! A fresh new life begins.
O'er this path I'm soon to reckon,
Lord, cast there my mortal sins.
Let me greet this new day dawning;
Blot all sorrow from my mind.
Free me from all earthly haunting,
Leaving doubt and woe behind.
Halt dear Lord, this frantic hurry.
Wrest these burdens; rest my soul.
Lift from me all want and worry,
Make me pure Lord, make me whole.
[N. Nomad]

And so, now you know a bit about the mystery surrounding the wanderlust deep in the heart of this old man. Ah, so now comes the time; time for *Nomad's* Poison! For some of you here this evening, this will be but a booster shot. However, for those of you new to this form of *natural* real-life treatment for the soul, this will your initial inoculation—and (unfortunately for you) it will take!

“There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain's crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don't know how to rest.”
[Service]

“Here's to all hearts of that cold, lonesome track,
To the life of the wanderlust...free.
To all who have gone and have never come back,
Here's a tribute to you and to me.
With our feet in the dirt we're the grit of the earth,
Heads a-ridin' the heavens o'erhead.
And they won't find a nickel of value or worth,
When our fortunes are tallied and read.
But no richer clan has there ever been known,
Since the times of all ruin and wrack;
Than those of us lost to the dust outward blown,
Who have gone and have never come back.”

[N. Nomad]

(*Dutch Treat* performs his beautiful rendition of the above ditty, Land of the Free.)

Nimblewill then speaks to that fire in our gut—Robert Service’s take on it: “The wanderlust has got me by the bellyaching fire...”

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

[Frost]

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow it if I can,..”

[Tolkien]

A trail through Maine’s north wilderness,
Past bogs and ponds of blue,
Beckons the restless wanderlust
down deep in me and you.

So, off in the swirling mist we go
With our boots and raingear on,
While friends at home and folks we love
Try figurin’ what went wrong.

But we’ll rove these woods and mountainsides
Awaitin’ that bye-and-bye,
A perfect dawn when packs take wing,
And the treadway climbs the sky.”

[N. Nomad]

“Lord set me a path by the side of the road,
Pray this be a part of your plan.
Then heap on the burden and pile on the load
'n I'll trek it the best that I can.

Please bless me with patience; touch strength to my back;
Then cut me loose and I'll go.
Just like the burro totin' his pack,
The oxen plowin' his row.

And once on this journey, a witness for you
To'rd thy truth, thy way...and the light.
Shine bright my countenance steady and true,

O'er the pathway to goodness and right.

And lest I should falter and lest I should fail,
Let all who know that I tried.
For I am a bungler, feeble and frail,
When you, dear Lord, I've denied.

So blessed be the day your judgment comes due,
And blessed be your mercy bestowed;
And blessed be this journey, all praises to you—
O'er this path by the side of the road.”
[N. Nomad]

(Nimblewill closes by speaking to the many questions often asked of we intrepid, especially that one we don't want to hear—Why?)

“It's the people, the places,
The pain and the trials.
It's the joy and the blessings
That come with the miles.
It's a calling gone out
To a fortunate few.
To wander the fringes
Of God's hazy blue.”
[N. Nomad]

(*Dutch Treat* wraps it up with his beautiful rendition of the above poem, “Why Go?”)