



WESTCHESTER TRAILS ASSOCIATION

The Early Years

WESTCHESTER TRAILS ASSOCIATION was originally formed as a temporary organization in the summer of 1923 by Mrs. Charles Geppert Marsh, Westchester County's Director of Recreation, under a resolution adopted to seek use of land in Westchester County "for the purpose of aiding and facilitating continuous horse and foot trails, and to encourage participation in hiking and enjoyment of the out-of-doors." Formally organized by the County on September 10, 1923, the club's Constitution affirmed its intent to "promote appreciation of the natural beauties of Westchester County, secure trails for those who ride horseback, improve the old foot and bridle paths, publish information for the benefit of the public in regard to all trail facilities, and assist the Director of Recreation in training hike leaders".

The club's first president was Col. Charles Francis Bates (U.S. Army Ret.), author of the 1936 biography "Custer's Indian Battles". Its first hike was held on September 29, 1923 in the Silver Lake area near White Plains, starting at the terminus of the New York, Westchester and Boston Railway (now the site of the Westchester Mall), and ending at Rye Pond and Kensico Dam (now NYC watershed land). Included among WTA's early hike leaders was Raymond Torrey, co-author of the original New York Walk Book and one of the founders of the New York New Jersey Trail Conference, for whom the Torrey Memorial was dedicated atop Long Mountain in Harriman State Park.

Another popular leader was the club's second president, Charles B. Reid - while hikers of that era preferred to carry a large coffee pot and a pound of coffee to make a hot drink for lunch, Mr. Reid was known for "properly preparing hot tea for the group."



Lunchtime gathering at Pound Ridge circa 1928.



Ramapo Mountain hike, March 14, 1926.



Larchmont Reservoir, late 1920's

The well dressed hiker of the 1920's no doubt looked to recommendations made in club schedules when deciding what to take on an outing. Although advice has changed somewhat since 1925 when these photos were taken, most of the basics remain the same:

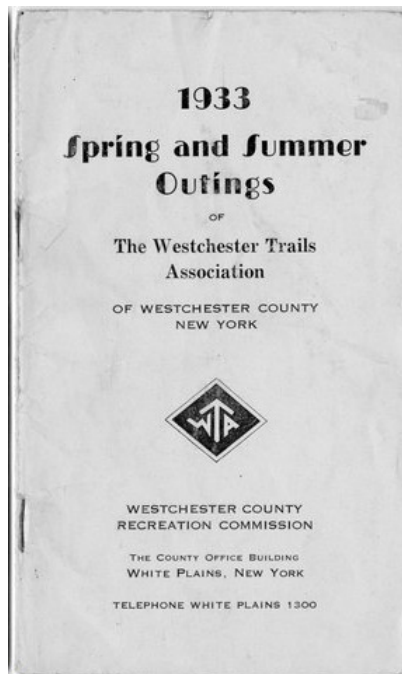
Bring lunch and a canteen or thermos as drinking water is not regularly available. The most comfortable way to carry these, plus extra clothing, etc., is in a knapsack, although a shoulder bag will do. Hikers should have both hands free.

Strong shoes with broad flat heels are a must. In winter, when trails are wet or snowy, a rubber bottom, leather top boot 8 or 10" high is best.

Carry some sort of rain gear if the weather is at all threatening. There is seldom any shelter on hikes, even at lunch time. Take an extra sweater and socks. It may be colder than you expect.

Women should not wear skirts on the trail.





Outings Schedules prepared by the County featured hikes to many of the areas we visit today, as well as tours of charitable institutions such as Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry and afternoon teas at the estates of philanthropic residents. Here are excerpts of hike writeups from WTA's 1933 Spring and Summer Outing Schedule, which is the earliest in our archives:

Sunday, January 29 - Anthony's Nose. 8 miles. Park cars in Peekskill and take the train to Manitou, then climb the trail up to Anthony's Nose. The climb will be within the limits of the average hiker. Excellent scenery. Return to Peekskill by hiking along the river.

Sunday, February 5 - Exploration Trip. New Territory will be scouted for a future outing. Distance and terrain unknown. Be prepared with two lunches.

Saturday, March 18 - Ardsley-on-Putnam. Follow foot paths along the new Saw Mill River Parkway and roads to Ardsley Heights. A 5 mile walk, not strenuous.

Week-End March 25-26 - Taconic Park Reservation and Bash Bish Falls. Trip to Copake Falls leaving Saturday afternoon, arriving Taconic Park in evening, stay overnight in Park cabins, hike Sunday morning and return Sunday afternoon on automobile trip. A stop may be made if desired at Drover's Inn, Dover Plains for dinner. Dinner \$1.50, very good.

Saturday, April 15 - Hunter's Island. Easy walk of about seven miles along pathways of Hutchinson River Parkway and bridle path through woods to Hunter's Island and Twin Island. Start from Mt. Vernon, returning by trolley.

Sunday, May 7 - Mount Taurus. Good woods roads and easy climbing to summit of Mt. Taurus, glorious views of Hudson River and surrounding country. Camp fire, bring lunch cup and spoon. Distance about 10 miles.

Saturday, June 10 - Need We Fear Snakes? Details to be announced later.

Week-End June 17-18 - Sunset and Evening Star. Overnight gathering in the Lake country of Northern Westchester - swimming and hiking. Take food for three meals, blankets and sufficient protection for a night in the open. There is no near by shelter known to the leader.

Saturday, July 15 - Westchester County Camps, Harmon on Hudson. Visit the camps and, if desired, places of historical interest at Croton Point. Walk of about four miles, swimming in the Hudson, picnic supper on the beach, join with campers in evening activities.



If this spot looks familiar to hikers who frequent Harriman State Park, that's because this 1939 photo was taken from the expansive viewpoint atop Claudius Smith's Den.



One hiker's unique perspective of Pound Ridge. Winter, 1940.

Beset with membership problems in its early years and lack of leaders willing to volunteer because of low turnout on the hikes, WTA came close to being disbanded during World War II due to lack of participation. In October of 1947 club president William H. Knapp warned that the organization had reached the point where it might not continue beyond the current year, and he sent out a questionnaire asking for suggestions as to how to turn the tide on WTA's declining fortunes. Most responses quite naturally dealt with "getting the word out" through publicity, putting fliers in stores, talking up the club to friends, and otherwise promoting the organization's activities. One member, though, focused on building support from within. He advocated:

"More respect for the old, for the oddities, for families, for those who are above us, for those who are below us...There must be a backbone of regulars, that is, folks who love to hike and who come out regularly. ... [And] the president ought to hike with the club about 90% of the time!"

Whether due to member recommendations, hard work or the happenstance of an improving postwar economy, the club persevered and its membership grew, from a low of 50 members in 1951 to 118 by the end of the decade. An Outings Committee Report from 1952/53 exemplified the dedication of WTA's core group of hikers:

"This year we had 25 hikes, 2 weekend trips (one to the Catskills and one to the Delaware Water Gap), a boat ride across Long Island Sound, a canoe outing on Lake Waccabuc, swimming at Sherwood Island, and a Christmas Party with Sound Film Exhibits plus coffee and delicious confectionery. The unusually

frequent rainfalls cut down the attendance on hikes. Yet we cannot be called sissies. I know that I partook in three hikes on days where the weather outlook was bad and each time about a dozen hikers showed up and suffered the drenching goodhumoredly."



In 1961 WTA decided to separate from the County, and it became an independent organization, incorporated with the renewed purpose of promoting hiking and outdoor recreation in Westchester and the surrounding area. Today, with the energetic assistance and ideas of its volunteer officers, board members, hike leaders, trail maintainers, committee chairs, long time members and "newbies", WTA continues to pursue its original goals of hiking and good fellowship that were established some 90 years ago.

