

WESTCHESTER TRAILS  
ASSOCIATION



100<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
1923 - 2023

A Walk Through The Decades

# WESTCHESTER TRAILS ASSOCIATION

was originally formed in September of 1923 by the County of Westchester under a resolution and charter adopted 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”.

Dues were set at \$1 per year. A 1924 Recreation Commission Report listed the income and expenses for our first year of operation, and showed that we had a nice cushion in our treasury going into the next fiscal period:

WESTCHESTER TRAILS ASSOCIATION			
Membership dues .....		\$	203.00
Donation for trails and shelters.....			15.00
Winter camp profit.....			15.09
Expenditures .....	\$	148.54	
			-----
	\$	148.54	\$ 233.09
To balance .....		84.55	
			-----
	\$	233.09	\$ 233.09
Balance forward.....	\$84.55		

The club’s first president was Col. Charles Francis Bates, an author and retired U.S. Army officer. 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 Ward Pound Ridge circa 1928.

**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 the photos on the next page 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.

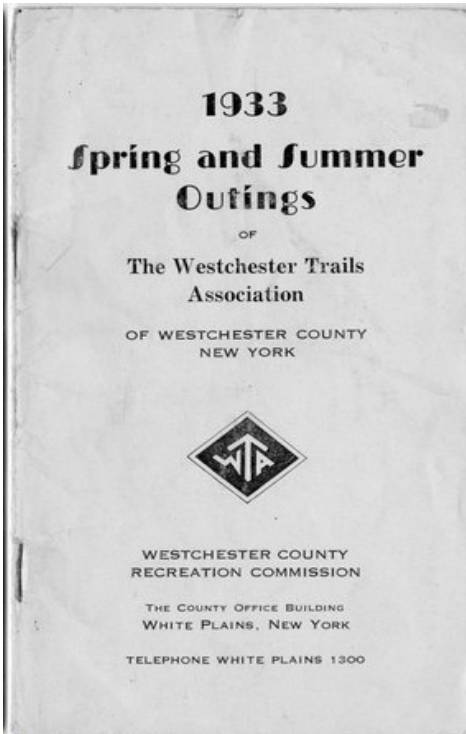
“Strong shoes with broad flat heels are a must. In winter, when trails are wet or snowy, a rubber bottom, leather top boot 8 or 10" high is best.

“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. Outings will not be postponed on account of inclement weather.

“Women should not wear skirts on the trail.”



Larchmont Reservoir, late 1920's



**Outings Schedules** featured hikes to many of the places we visit today, as well as afternoon teas at the estates of philanthropic residents and tours of charitable institutions such as Children's Village. Here are excerpts from a few entries in the 1933 Spring and Summer Schedule:

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

Sunday, February 26 - Appalachian Trail.  
The Association will clear a small section of the Appalachian Trail south of Clear Lake. Bring hatchet.

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. Arrive Taconic Park, stay overnight in cabins, hike Sunday morning and return Sunday afternoon. A stop may be made if desired at Drover's Inn, Dover Plains for dinner. Dinner \$1.50, very good.



Bash Bish Falls, August 1936

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.

**Walks along the carriage roads of the Rockefeller Estate have always been popular, but not many can say they were invited there by the owners. The caption beneath the *New York Times* photo on the next page read: "Walkers of the Westchester Trails Association, headed by Donald Kling (extreme left) of the Board of Directors of the Westchester County Recreation Commission, assembled at East View for a hike through the grounds of the philanthropist's Pocantico Hills Property."**

Photographic Picture Section  
Westchester—Connecticut

# The New York Times

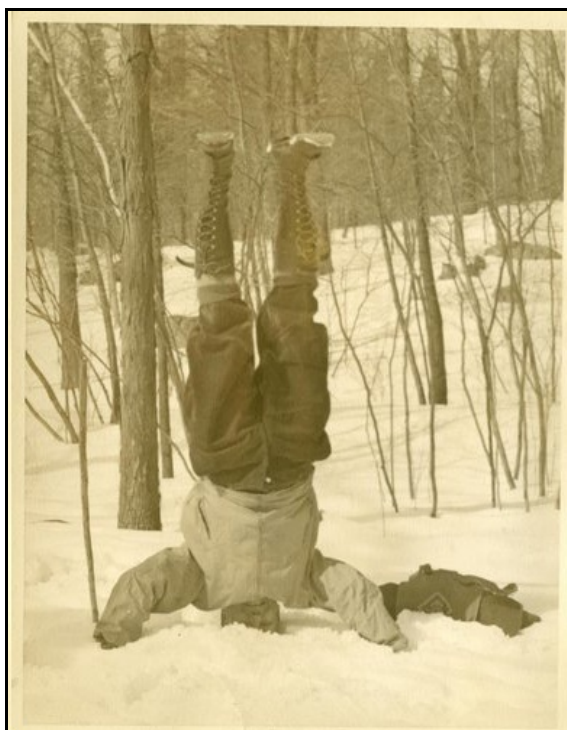
Sunday  
March 9, 1930







Atop Claudius Smith's Den in Harriman, 1939



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

**In December 1941 the United States entered World War II.** Membership in the club declined due to wartime service, available leaders were reluctant to volunteer because of low turnout on the hikes, and WTA came close to being disbanded. A 1943 schedule referenced shortages caused by the war, and urged remaining members to take turns using their cars “so that we have enough gasoline for some of our favorite trips during the best months for hiking.” By October of 1947 WTA’s president William H. Knapp warned that the organization had reached a 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 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. 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."



Brisk walk, circa 1955

**And a 1955 article** prepared by the Recreation Commission detailed an increase in many of the County's outings, including those sponsored by the club:

# OUT-OF-DOORS

1,234 Individual youngsters attended the Boarding Camps at Croton Point during the summer. 75% of the children were sent by Social and Welfare Agencies and 25% from private homes.

2,462 people used the camps for Fall and Spring Camping.

More and more demands for camping by individuals and scout, church, school and other county groups has taxed the full capacity of the boy's and girl's camps.

40 outings under the direction of 18 leader-members were conducted by the Westchester Trails Association during the year. This group is an affiliated organization with a membership of 125 outdoor enthusiasts.



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**Did you know that WTA has its own song?** Written in 1951 by club member Phyllis Williams Belletta, it was sung to the tune of Aura Lee and predates Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender," which borrows from the same melody:

♪ ♪ When the leaves have turned to gold and  
frost is in the air,  
Once again we're off on foot, a-hiking  
everywhere.

Tally Ho, off we go, over hills and dales,  
Faithful now and ever more, to you Westchester  
Trails!

Thru the winter rain and snow, until the end of  
spring,  
Still the trails we follow true, and this song we  
sing:

Tally Ho, off we go, over hills and dales,  
Faithful now and ever more, to you Westchester  
Trails!

**In 1961** WTA decided to separate from the County and become an independent organization. As a condition to joining the club, its founding papers required that prospective members successfully complete three hikes and be approved by the Membership Committee. In a 1975 article in the *Herald Statesman*, club president John Sullivan explained that very few applicants had been refused by the committee over the years. "One woman insisted on listening to a loud transistor radio while she was walking...we just didn't need

that. Others didn't want to bother completing the hikes," and a few sat down and simply refused to continue after covering a short distance. Rejections were few and far between, though, and in 1998 the hike and approval requirements were eliminated.

**The 1970's** was a time of innovation for WTA. According to the book *Harriman Trails* by Bill Myles, our members were the first to come up with the idea of using double offset blazes to indicate a turn - now the standard method of blazing in the area. This happened during the construction of the Beech Trail in Harriman State Park in 1972. The trail was named in honor of Art Beach, an active club member who was also the New York - New Jersey Trail Conference's representative to the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, but at Art's insistence the spelling was changed to the name of the tree.

Not all revisions were permanent. During the 1970's the club's patch and logo, formerly a stylized "WTA" within a diamond in use since 1923, was replaced with the outdoor theme on the right. But the logo was soon abandoned and the diamond design reinstated

after some WTA members began referring to the stream in the foreground as a "river of blood through the snowfields".





Holiday party at Teatown, circa 1978

A new system of reimbursing drivers for carpool expenses was also introduced in the 1970's. Previously, the amount a passenger paid was decided by the hike leader. Figures varied widely, and in 1974 WTA's cartographer-extraordinaire, Don Derr, devised a system to remedy this inequity. He drew concentric circles on a map with the center of the universe being White Plains, and assigned a cost to each circle based on distance from the center, tolls, and the presumed number of people in a car. The result was published in the schedule as a passenger's "transportation contribution". The system was ingenious but highly complicated, its intricacies known only to Don. When he passed away in 2011 WTA decided to turn to the "cents per mile" formula used by other hiking clubs and still in use today, in which actual mileage, parking fees and tolls are

calculated on the day of the hike and then divided among the passengers and driver.

**The 1980's** saw a significant increase in activity, and in 1984 club membership hit an all-time high of 428. In order to honor members whose efforts had contributed to the vitality of the club, a life membership category was created, to be awarded to people 65 years or over who had been WTA members for at least 25 years and who had devoted at least 10 years of extraordinary service to the club. Currently there are eight WTA Life Members: Minu Chaudhuri, Mike Doehring, Marie Gleason, Herb Hochberg, Paula Levine, George O'Lear, Catharine Raffaele and Eileen West.



Holiday party sing-along, December 1985





70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Hike at Rockefeller State Park, 1993

**By the mid 1990's** the kinds of hikes offered by the club began to change. Long time leaders who could no longer do 10 miles a day in Harriman started to organize easier outings, but new leaders were not taking their place. The club's core values of being a social, caring and cohesive group who loved the outdoors never wavered, but the lack of variety in the schedules made it difficult to attract new members. Over the next decade our membership declined, hitting a low of 183 in 2008. We were not alone in experiencing a loss of members during this time - it was a familiar pattern of surges and declines seen by many clubs. Still, we were determined to turn things around based on a simple formula: more leaders = more hikes = more variety = more members.

**So, in 2009 - 2010**, WTA took several steps to change the club's trajectory. First, we partnered with ADK's Mohican chapter to initiate a series of joint hikes in order to expand the options offered to members of both clubs. This cooperative venture, which still continues, has worked well. We are now able to offer "something for everyone", with our schedules showing two hikes per day on almost every Saturday and Sunday.



We also initiated our Westchester 100 project. Inspired by the "Walkable Westchester" books written by Jane and Walt Daniels, we compiled a list of 91 "regular" hikes and 18 "half hikes" in the county, challenged people to complete the list, and bestowed upon finishers a patch and unlimited bragging rights. So far there have been ten Westchester 100 finishers (Rev. Jeff Geary, Debbie Farrell, Lisa Weismiller, Mike Cunningham, Jane Restani, Jennifer Reidy, Carolyn Hoffman, Lauren Linkowski, Kathie Laug and Jane Smalley), with several more people actively working on the list.

Finally, we expanded our custom of taking trips to a more distant location, substituting Hiking Weeks for the long weekends that had been done before. These trips, to the Berkshires, the Catskills, the Adirondacks, Shenandoah, Acadia, and Harpers Ferry National Park, among other places, are now a club tradition.



While at Shenandoah National Park during our 2013 Hiking Week we had a chance to celebrate Ellie Carren's 91<sup>st</sup> birthday...



...and to celebrate Debbie Farrell's final 3500' summit on our 2015 Hiking Week in the Catskills



We held our 2016 Hiking Week in Acadia National Park (we're going back to Acadia this September!)



and we enjoyed happy hours on Lake Placid in 2018



**Then, in early 2020, COVID-19** appeared on the scene. The world changed, and our protocols changed with it. At first we canceled all of our hikes, but we soon realized that outings could be resumed on a modified basis if we kept the groups small, eliminated carpools, and took other precautions. To allow for changing conditions we sent emails to members with hike listings instead of printing a formal schedule. And because of the disruptions in 2020 the club waived membership renewal dues for the following year. People were told not to send us their money, but to use the \$12 to buy something for themselves instead.



Although there could have been more social distancing during this visit to Peekskill Landing Park in May, 2020, at least everyone was wearing a mask.



On the Sterling Ridge Trail, October 2020

As the months went by interest in our hikes increased considerably. Outings were often oversubscribed, and leaders began to enlist co-leaders so two groups could separately do the route and more people could participate. In the summer of 2021, when vaccines became widely available, our Covid policies were relaxed. While the “new normal” currently requires that participants be vaccinated and that masks be worn in crowded settings, other restrictions have been lifted and our policies continue evolve.

If it could be said that something positive came out of the pandemic, it was the fact that more people began to explore the out-of-doors when other avenues of social activity and exercise were cut off. So much so, in fact, that trails and hiking areas became overwhelmed (see the photo on the next page from the Fall 2020 Friends of the

Rockefeller State Park Preserve magazine, showing cars lined up along Route 117 after their parking lot hit capacity).



As more venues reopened and people returned to their usual activities, some folks who recognized the joys and benefits of hiking stayed with it. In June of 2020 there were 238 WTA members. By June of 2021 our membership had surged to 356; and with the resumption by many people of their pre-Covid habits, our June 2022 membership numbers settled at 308.

The pandemic didn't stop folks from coming on hikes or attending our events. Although restrictions applied, holiday parties and early New Year's Eve walks went forward, our annual dinner resumed in 2022, and our traditional Hiking Weeks continued with increased participation. In 2020 we returned to the Catskills and 22 people attended; in 2021 we hiked in central Connecticut and 28 people were there; and in 2022 our Hiking

Week in Harpers Ferry and the Delaware Water Gap had a robust attendance of 35.



Early New Year's Eve Walk, December 31, 2021



Relaxing near the end of the trail at Maryland's Cunningham Falls State Park during our 2022 Hiking Week.



**As we celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> year**, buoyed by the energetic assistance and ideas of our volunteer officers, board members, hike leaders, trail maintainers, committee chairs, long time members and “newbies”, WTA is moving forward, all the while continuing to pursue its original goals of hiking and good fellowship that were established a century ago.



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