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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

CAREERS | SEPTEMBER 21, 2009

Trailing Indicators: Out of a Job, Some Decide to Take a Hike

By JOEL MILLMAN

RUTLAND, Vt. -- Unable to find steady work in a dismal Florida job market, Dan Kearns did something a lot of gainfully employed Americans can only dream of: Ditch the straight life and hike the length of the Appalachian Trail.



DAN KEARNS

Shouldering a 50-pound backpack, the 32-year-old construction worker hopped onto the trail in April at Neels Gap, Ga., joining other "through-hikers" bound for the AT's northern end point, nearly 2,200 miles away in Maine's Baxter State Park. He sold his car for \$1,000 to finance the first leg of the trip, relying after that on handouts and the occasional farm job -- often backbreaking work weeding vegetable beds or rolling bales of hay.

"I wouldn't do this if I was employed," the New Jersey native explains. "I couldn't find any work, so I just decided to take a walk."

He also took a trail moniker, "Snipe," and joined two hikers in Virginia who called themselves "Angry Hippie" and "Dance Party." Over Labor Day weekend, the three trudged into Rutland, the final stop before the slog through New Hampshire's White Mountains and Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness.

An economist might have another name for Snipe and his fellow travelers: trailing indicators. Depending on one's level of optimism, an Appalachian Trail through-hiker is either a symbol of a jobless recovery or of a still-deepening recession.

In any case, there has been a surplus of hikers this year on the Appalachian Trail, which was unexpectedly in the news in June when South Carolina's Gov. Mark Sanford used the excuse of hiking the trail while pursuing an extramarital affair in Argentina. Typically, about 1,000 hikers leave Georgia each spring in hopes of completing the trail in one all-out trek. This year, trail monitors say, close to 1,400 hikers were in the first wave, with hundreds more following behind through early summer.

Now, as the last of the north-bonders -- known as NoBos -- enter New England, they're meeting lagging south-bonders, or SoBos, racing toward Georgia. Hikers say they budget \$1 a mile for food and the rare motel stay, making life on the trail cheaper than life in town -- and much more socially acceptable.

"If you do this on the trail, you're a hiker," says The Druid, a 48-year-old south-bonder from Tennessee. "If you do this off the trail, you're a bum."

NoBos and SoBos are reminiscent of the hobos of the Great Depression, though there aren't so many of them this time. Moreover, they're a throwback to a simpler economy, where swapping short-term labor for food and shelter was common.

That barter system remains today. Dozens of "Trail Angels" provide free meals and lodging to hikers who are short of cash. "I was shooting pool in Duncannon, Pa., with a hiker named Big Camera. I heard a guy at the bar offering \$12 an hour to clean his yard," recalls Jack Magullian, a 55-year-old through-hiker whose trail name is Archaeopterix.

Motel operator Ron Haven of Franklin, N.C., is known as a generous soul, willing to exchange nights in beds that have real sheets for light labor like cleaning guest rooms.

Elmer Hall at the Sunnybank Inn nearby in Hot Springs is another soft touch. "People will stay for a week or a month," says Mr. Hall, who hiked most of the AT himself in 1976. He pays \$8 an hour to anyone who stays more than a week and does chores. This season he has employed about 75 through-hikers, he says, mainly to toss feed to his ducks and chickens, or to pick berries or weed his organic garden.

"I saw more people who are out of work this year," Mr. Hall adds. "You get six months' government unemployment, and it's cheaper to live off the land."

Some people complain of aggressive panhandling, robberies and homeless hikers blending in with genuine backpackers to take advantage of free food or work-for-stay opportunities.

"The biggest problem is the have-nots latching onto the haves and trying to mooch their way up the trail," says Jeff Hooch, who runs The Hike Inn close to where the Appalachian Trail enters Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "This creates stress around the campsites."

Up in New England, through-hikers have become a popular form of just-in-time labor for rural businesses, especially for organic farmers like Joseph De Sena.

He operates Amee Farm in Pittsfield, Vt., which lies a few miles from a trailhead. Mr. De Sena says that in a good year, "hikers could provide 50% of the labor we need," doing everything from watering lettuce in the greenhouse, to weeding the garden to shearing the sheep.

He estimates that hiring similar labor locally, if he could find it, would cost \$50 to \$75 a day. He does a barter deal with hikers who stay at the farm in exchange for their labor. No money is exchanged.

But it isn't always an easy fit, Mr. De Sena says.

"We thought there was a correlation between people who would hike the 2,200 miles and an incredible work ethic," says the 40-year-old entrepreneur, a former Wall Street trader who, besides farming, also operates an asset-management firm. "Turns out those people tend to be athletic hippies, just looking to have fun forever."

He lucked out when he met Wes Foster and Stacy Burdett, two through-hikers from Tampa, Fla., who recently completed their journey. The couple decided to winter at Amee Farm, swapping their labor for room and board and the chance to learn organic farming.

"I'd love to have a farm like this one day," says Ms. Burdett, who has a degree in massage therapy and worked in theater production before hiking the trail.

Dominic Palumbo's Moon in the Pond organic farm in Sheffield, Mass., is another AT neighbor who harvests through-hikers' labor.

Mr. Palumbo's efforts began in 2005, when a former through-hiker named Rich Ciotola came to work at Moon in the Pond as an apprentice.

"We were short of hands, and had no money to hire anyone," the 53-year-old farmer recalls. "Rich just ran up the trail and came back with some guys." Mr. Palumbo has been relying on hikers ever since, even publicizing his work-for-stay swap in trail guides. This summer Mr. Ciotola began working his own farm, employing hikers from his old mentor's spread whenever he had extras to spare.

Andrea Wilkins, from Maryland, and Jon Letteer, a Texan, were two south-bounders who worked at Moon in the Pond this month. The two labored 14-hour days in the late summer sun but were grateful for a respite from walking.

Mr. Letteer, 23, has a job waiting for him in Austin, but his 22-year-old hiking partner doesn't. She says that once she finishes hiking, she hopes to join the Peace Corps and go to Africa or Micronesia. "They asked if I had farming experience when I applied, and I hadn't," she says, stretching as she weeds onions. "But this is farm experience that could go on my résumé. Man, they would love it!"

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A1

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