

In Remembrance of Otey Harper Shelton
November 8, 1915 - May 14, 2007

A collection of memories from his friends in the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club

[Editor's Note: Otey was an extremely influential member of the early days of the TATC, although not an original "founding member". He was president of TATC during the calendar years 1979-1980. Those of us who contribute below knew him from so many times together. He led innumerable hikes and paddles and, along with Harold Crate, was a construction manager and chief stone mason during the construction by TATC of the Douglas Putman cabin. He led a full, rich life. I have kept intact the stories as submitted to me by their authors, retaining their voice and style, with only minor editing.~~Mal Higgins]

This is a version of remarks delivered by Mal Higgins at the funeral of Otey Harper Shelton, May 18, 2007, Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Hampton Virginia.

Mal Higgins:

**A Man Who Mattered
By Mal Higgins**

Otey was a man who was generous of spirit and generous of material things, a man who could teach, a man who could lead, a man who could work and a man who could play and be mischievous. A recent sign on a reader board in Virginia Beach says "Your world is only as big as you make it." Otey helped me make my world bigger. Otey was a man who mattered.

I'm going to tell you about some of these things, seen through my lens as his friend in the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club since 1976.

There wasn't much Otey couldn't do when it came to a project. Need to scout out a proposed trail? Need to build a stone cabin in the wood half a mile from a road? Need a new outhouse? Need to build a floating dock on a tidal river? "Who 'ya gonna call?" Otey, that's who.

In the Fall of 1977, several members of TATC, including Otey and Reese Lukei, wanted to design a loop trail that would connect Maupin Field Shelter on the Appalachian Trail section maintained by TATC with the Harpers Creek area of the trail. Over a number of different weekend attempts to locate a route, they eventually succeeded in the Spring of 1978 in laying out the route. Over the next year, the Club built the trail and after a spirited debate at one of its meetings, the membership selected the name "Mau Har Trail" over the rival proposed name, "Campbell Creek Trail." The Mau Har Trail remains a favorite hiking trail to this day along a beautiful creek and a series of waterfalls and through a beautiful stretch of forest.

In the Fall of 1978, during a Mau Har Trail construction trip, Otey discovered a very large Timber Rattlesnake curled up where they were clearing. Again Reese Lukei is implicated in this. They decided that the other members of the work crew should get to enjoy the snake. Reese fashioned a forked stick to pin the rattler's head down, and then he and Otey took turns grabbing the snake with a strong handgrip behind the head and carrying it up to the campsite a half mile away at Maupin Field. Everyone was still out on the trail working, so it seemed only logical to remove all the food from the wooden camp

food box for temporary rattlesnake storage. A note warning of the snake inside was written and placed on top of the box, and they returned to work. A couple of hours later upon returning, Otey and Reese faced the wrath of Jacquie Jenkins, the camp cook, who found it in her box. Her punishment was that she would only cook grits for Otey and Reese for the remaining meals! Otey and Reese hated grits! The snake was released, but that night everyone made sure their tent zippers were all the way up.

Beginning in 1975, TATC formed a "Cabin Committee." The club desired to acquire or build a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In 1978 the Club received a gift of \$15,000 in honor and memory of a young man named Douglas Lee Putman. A committee located and purchased 15 acres off the Blue Ridge Parkway, and for the next three years beginning in 1979 Otey and another legendary club member, now deceased, Harold Crate, designed and led the Club members in the construction of the Douglas Lee Putman Cabin. Harold, a retired civil engineer, oversaw the complete design and the framing, roof support rafters, windows, and doors.

Otey convinced the cabin committee to build a stone cabin rather than a conventional wood cabin. He spoke of a stone church he'd helped build with his brothers in Amherst County as a young man. Otey oversaw the pouring of the footers, the mixing of mortar, the selection of stone from off the adjacent grounds and abandoned old stone farm walls, and the laying of the stone for all the walls and fireplace. He personally brought sandstone rock from the Canaan Valley area of West Virginia in his favorite truck, a Ford F-250 named "Big Blue, to use to face the inside cabin fireplace surface. On more than one occasion Otey required that a course or two of stones that were improperly laid in his absence had to be torn out and redone. In May 1982 the 20 foot by 30 foot cabin was essentially completed, built by all volunteer labor on weekends over three years. The cabin is in constant use today.

But Otey didn't stop at building cabins. When a new outhouse pit had to be dug at Maupin Field in the 1980s Otey led the effort. When the digging was done, a perfectly good old outhouse, which was permanently secured to its concrete slab over the old hole, was in too good a shape to waste. Otey engineered some log rollers, placed a chain around the outhouse, attached a "come along" hand winch, and proceeded to pull the old outhouse and concrete slab over the rollers and on top of the new hole!

The places Otey led hikes or canoe trips in the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club are too numerous to mention. He taught a lot of novice canoeists the fundamentals on such rivers and in such places as the James, the Tye, the Maury, the Chowan, the New, the Dismal Swamp, Merchants Mill Pond, and Back Bay Wildlife Refuge and False Cape State Parks. He taught many a club member, including me, how to rappel on Old Rag Mountain. He led hikes all over the Appalachian Trail, the Tuscarora Trail, the George Washington National Forest, Shenandoah National Park, the wilds of Dolly Sods and Canaan Valley, West Virginia, and the fearsome and freezing Adirondack Mountains of New York.

For many years beginning about 1975, Otey led annual winter camping trips in January and February. I joined in this madness in 1978 because Otey made it sound fun! In January came the "winter tune up" hike to the Dolly Sods Wilderness. Exploring the vast, freezing, and nearly trail-less Dolly Sods on a white and glistening winter day, was good preparation for what was to follow in a couple of weeks in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. In the early years we'd depart right after an evening club meeting in late January or early February and we'd drive all night to the High Peaks area. With 50 pounds or heavier backpacks, we'd snowshoe up the trail to establish a tent site in the snow or set up in a three sided shelter at areas such as Marcy Dam or John's Brook. Over the years we attempted and sometimes made it to the tops of the summits of the Adirondacks most intimidating peaks, such as Mt. Marcy, Mt. Algonquin, Mt. Skylight, Mt. Colden, Lower Wolfjaw, Upper Wolfjaw, Big Haystack and Little Haystack.

Otey taught us the sheer joy of the solitude and emptiness of these winter landscapes, and the knowledge that no one else was even out there was the magic that brought one back. Bent over in the face of blasting cold winds across landscapes far above tree line, gray and leaden skies, impossibly steep and icy slopes, breaking through the crust and sinking up to your arm pits or worse when supporting branches of buried trees give way beneath your weight—all these are part of the winter backpacking experience. Camping out in temperatures well below freezing, we learned that when the sun went down at 6:00, about the only sensible thing to do was crawl into your sleeping bag and spend the next 12-13 hours or so snoozing, shivering and wishing it was sunrise. Otey would tell us of the 50 degrees below freezing temperatures he endured while fighting as a Marine near the Korean border with China in the battle around the Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War. He was a survivor of the “Chosin Frozen”.

Otey always seemed to be the first one up. Bill Rogers, a TATC trail club member, penned a poem about hiking with Otey, which includes these lines:

“In a stand of spruce, half up a hill,
We set up our tents in the evening chill.
Saturday morn, whilst snores were still loud,
Came the wee small voice of Otey,
“Aren’t these people ever getting up?”

In the decades that followed, Otey stayed active in the Club. In the summer of 1997 he joined many other club members at the biennial conference of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in Maine. At age 81 he joined about a dozen other hikers from the Club and climbed to the summit of Mt. Katahdin, the 5267 foot tallest peak in Maine. In the late 1990’s he assisted Pat Parker in the design and building of the gazebo and various trails in Hampton’s park called Sandy Bottom Nature Park. He also oversaw the installation of a floating boat dock in Hampton’s Air Power Park. Hanging from a sling 15 feet off the ground suspended from a crane Otey had arranged to be there, Otey showed us how to pound away with a sledge hammer on the tubular plastic pilings for the floating pier.

Otey had a favorite saying he says he learned from a general in the Korean War when the Marines were being driven back down the Korean Peninsula by the North Koreans and the Chinese. When asked how tough it was to retreat, the general reportedly replied: “That was no retreat; we were advancing in another direction!”

Otey was a man who mattered.

ROSANNE CARY:

**My Remembrances of Otey Shelton
by Rosanne Cary**

I first met Otey around 1995, when I was new to TATC. He was such an active hike leader, taking people hiking and canoeing around Virginia and beyond.

He seemed to have a special place in his heart for West Virginia.

Otey was taking a group canoeing down the Tye River. I'd never paddled a river, and didn't own a canoe. But Otey didn't let that stop me, he connected me with Ellis Malabad, who had a canoe and needed a paddling buddy for this trip. It was an invigorating time on the water with lots of rapids and tip overs; Ellis proved to be a good canoe commander and Otey a capable organizer, and that trip rates highly in my fond memories of "Otey trips."

In the fall of '96, Otey showed a group of us the finer points of the Dolly Sods Wilderness in West Virginia. Most of us had never been there before, and it was an adventurous treat! We set up camp in the woods, then hiked across bogs and beaver ponds and streams. It started raining when we were out a few miles from camp. Now, at this time I was an inexperienced hiker, and was wearing cotton clothing and had a pretty flimsy raincoat on. By the time we got back to camp, I was soaked, and I think some others were, too. Mal Higgins and Otey rigged a tarp in an effort to give us some shelter from the rain. I dived into my tent and put on the only dry clothes I had left, my pajamas. Then I heard Otey calling everyone to muster outside. He asked us a question - did we want to stay in camp, or hike out to Canaan to his friend's house, where he knew we could stay the night? It took a split second for all of us to say "let's go" and off we went, leaving camp as it was.

True to his word, Otey's friend amiably welcomed us to his home and turned over his basement room, complete with wood pellet stove, bed and chairs and the best feature of all - it was warm and dry! We dried out, cleaned up and went to the restaurant at Canaan Valley for dinner, then bunked in the basement for the night.

Otey sounded reveille at the crack of dawn, and we returned to Dolly Sods that bright and sunny morning to pack up camp and then head for home. It might seem to some reading this that the trip was a bust, but I didn't care one bit about being wet and in the rain, it was wonderful to be out with friends, having an exciting escapade. And Otey was our hero, leading us out of the wilderness to shelter. He always seemed to "know somebody" and had great connections in the world.

I would explore a good many places in the years to come with Otey in the lead, both through woods and wilderness as well as along swiftly flowing rivers. He had a daring spirit and was always up for an outing. He introduced so many people to places that were familiar to him but new and exciting to his friends. Otey was a force of nature that comes along once in a great while, and I feel privileged and glad to have known him.



1996 Group shot l-r: Mal Higgins, Carl Hanbury, Linda Ghanem, Ellis Malabad, Mary Bechtold, Gail, Otey Shelton. Photo by Rosanne Cary.



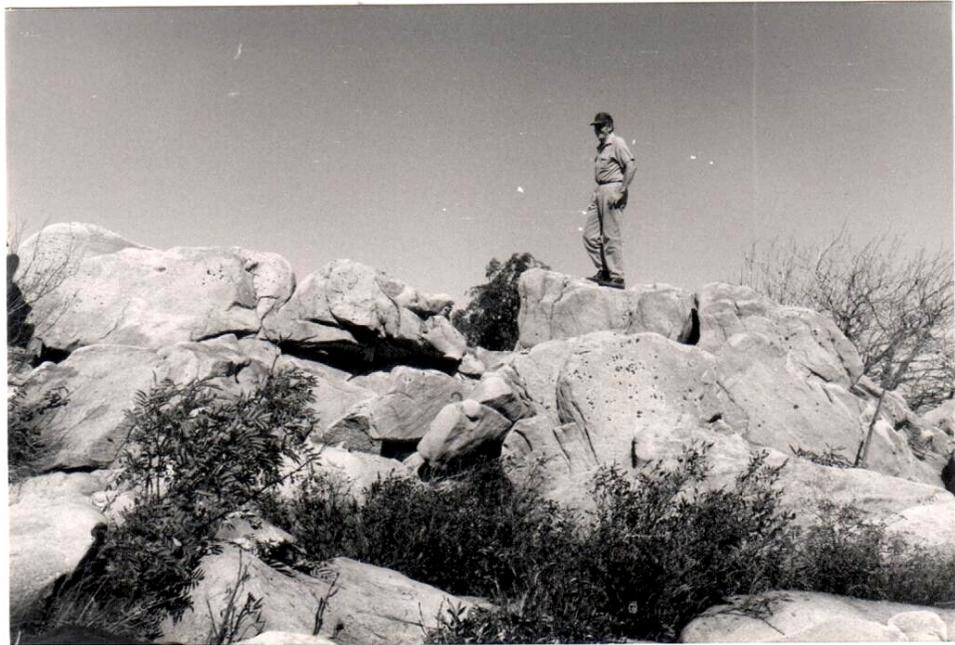
1996 Dolly Sods hike in the woods: Mal Higgins (in tree), Otey Shelton. Photo by Rosanne Cary

Bill Rogers:

**Dolly Sods Wilderness - October 1983
Otey Shelton – Trip Leader
Bill ‘Pulaskiteer’ Rogers – Trip Recorder**

Big Blue, bouncin’ and jouncin’,
Into the Wilderness carried the crew.
Over rocks and boulders without hesitation,
As smooth a ride as a kangaroo.
In a stand of spruce, half up a hill,
We set up our tents in the evening chill.
Saturday morn, whilst snores were still loud,
Came the wee small voice of Otey;
“Aren’t these people ever getting up?”
Breakfast behind us we did not tarry,
The ridges and rocks beckoned us on.
Down in the valley the fog was thick,
Hiding the ponds and the valley floor.
Autumn colors’ could not have been finer,
Each tree and bush a beautiful sight: -
Soft browns, resplendent yellows, brilliant
Reds, oranges, and mixtures of all.
Every hillside and each little hollow
Had beauty of its own for us to behold.
Rocks piled high were fascinating shapes to fantasize,
A whale, a fort, a humpbacked camel.
A mid-day snack caused eyelids to droop,
As we lay about soaking up the sun.
Later, an evening meal fueled the furnace
For sunset watching on rocks so warm.
Sunday another beautiful day,
With blueberries and blue birds and colors galore.
A doe bounding through the trees,
Pretty lichens under a magnifying glass.
Good friends, beautiful country,
A stream to soak away your cares -
For what more could you ask?
Sunday evening, after din-din and cornbread,
Sunset from the rocks - a spectacle enjoyed.
The moon and constellations paraded
Beauty across the heavens.
The Milky Way and a shooting star glittered above,
During the night a drip was heard;
But not from rain.
Dawn showed the Sods in a different mood,
Dark and dripping, windy and chill.
A cold windy fog covered the world,
And clung and dripped from everything.
The hike to the cars a chilly one,
Only humans abroad in this kind of weather!

The cars in sight, a last photograph -
Leaves covering the road.
Descending to the valley, each to their own thoughts.
A stop for a snack, a change of shoes;
Shopping at the Gendarme - the Old Mill too.
The ride home, country roads, autumn colors.
Tents are dried and put away,
The trip is over, yet it lives on.
The Sods are there, for one and all,



“Hark to their call...”

Otey Shelton Dolly Sods 1990 photo from Bill Rogers

BRUCE DAVIDSON:

**OTEY
By Bruce Davidson**

In the late 1970's, Otey Shelton was scoutmaster of Troop 2 in Hampton Va. I was a member of that troop until 1974 and had camped and backpacked with Otey since 1963. Otey was a terrific scoutmaster and we were a very active troop. In general, we went camping and backpacking every month. We did not cancel trips because of bad weather. We were prepared and if we had a trip planned, we always went on that trip.

Otey was a retired Marine; he was tough, dependable, a good leader, and an amazing person. Troop 2 took on some military functions under the leadership of Otey Shelton. We learned to march in formation, the military salute, and always practiced scout oath "Be Prepared." We also used military shelter half tents to camp and backpack with. Otey secured these canvas half tents that snapped together. They had no floor, and when it rained, we knew we were going to get wet.

About 1978, Otey had planned a backpack trip to Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park and camping at Byrd's Nest #1 shelter. At that time, you could set up tents near Byrd Nest. That is no longer true. I planned to meet up with Otey and the scouts of Troop 2 on Saturday night.

When my friend Dave and I arrived at trailhead Saturday morning, there was more than 1 foot of snow in the ground. We were thrilled! Both of us had received new Sherpa snowshoes for Christmas and we were eager to try them out. The ridge trail to Old Rag was extremely difficult. We had to constantly take the snow shoes off to climb on the rocks, then put them back on. Hiking was very slow and we were getting wet. It took us more than 9 hours to reach Byrd Nest Shelter #1, and we knew that Otey would be there. With a fire going and hot chocolate. We were totally exhausted and wet.

When we got to Byrd Nest there was no Troop 2 and no Otey. No hot chocolate and no warm fire. I found out later that Otey had cancelled his trip (he never cancelled a trip), because many of his boys were very young.

Dave and I built a fire to dry out and slept in the shelter. The next day, we snowshoed Weakley Hollow fire road back to the car. It was a great adventure and we did not hold anything against Otey!

Otey Shelton lived in West Virginia in the mid 1980's, so that he could spend more time in the outdoors. I used to visit and we did several backpacking and canoeing trips during this time. During a November weekend in 1985, Otey, a friend of mine Dave, and I went backpacking in Otter Creek Wilderness, WV, which is not too far from Dolly Sods Wilderness. We were looking to hike somewhere different after hiking so much in Dolly Sods. It turned into a very rainy weekend and our second day we called it quits. We got drenched and water level was high, so, we hiked out on Saturday, November 4.

Otey went back to his place and Dave and I dried off and drove back to Hampton Roads. The water level of rivers along Route 33 was very high and we thought we might come back for some canoeing next weekend. By the time we got home, a major flood had occurred in West Virginia and western Virginia. Route 33 was washed out west of Harrisonburg and tremendous damage reported in West Virginia

Later we found that that the flood did tremendous damage. There were 13,000 homes and businesses destroyed or damaged. The region endured the 100-year flood in a matter of hours, and 38 people perished in West Virginia.

I tried to contact Otey, but there wasn't any phone service. Several weeks later, roads were open so I drove to see Otey. Along the road to Canaan Valley, I passed homes and cars still in the river. I stopped at Seneca Rocks Visitors Center. It was empty except for mud, which reached the ceiling. I saw destruction everywhere along the road.

Stories of rescues that he told were amazing. I wish I had recorded the stories that Otey told. He was part of the Search and Rescue at Canaan Valley and spent days searching for bodies and helping flood victims. Much of his rescue efforts centered around Laneville, near Dolly Sods. He recounted numerous rescues and cutting down trees, over Red Creek, so that families were led to safety. The night of the flood he worked all night. Much of the lower part of Dolly Sods was washed away and trails vanished. Otey spent time relocating trail at a later time. I saw a picture of Otey cutting down a tree so that it would fall across the whitewater across Red Creek. A family on the other side of the creek was waiting for this tree to fall, so that they could get to safety

Otey was a very impressive, amazing person. He was my scoutmaster when I was in Scouts and that began our long friendship. In more than 40 years, we did so many hikes in Scouts and with the TATC.