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In Memoriam

Robert Proudman: 1948–2018

The trails community lost a dear friend and advocate in October 2018 with the death of Robert Proudman to cancer. Proudman worked and lived on behalf of the mountains, and especially the Appalachian Trail, for more than 50 years. His imprint can be found on trail maintenance techniques, backcountry campsites, just about every aspect of management along the Appalachian Trail, and in the hearts of colleagues and friends he mentored or befriended.

At 16, Bob began his mountain life with the Appalachian Mountain Club, first as a member of its trail crew and then as its first full-time trails supervisor in 1972. In 1975 he began what was a long and devoted career of protecting and managing the AT. Starting with its board of managers, Bob went on to work in the Appalachian Trail Park Office and ultimately worked a 36-year career with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (formerly known as the Appalachian Trail Conference) until he retired in 2015.

Bob, a nickname he acquired while working on the AMC trail crew, was the author and co-author, respectively, of the first and second editions of *AMC Field Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance* (now AMC's *Complete Guide to Trail Building & Maintenance*) and the first and second editions of the ATC's *Appalachian Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance*. During the 1960s and 1970s, human use of the backcountry soared, leaving many land managers puzzling over how to provide for the increased traffic while protecting fragile mountain environments. Proudman pioneered trail construction in the alpine zone meant to keep hikers on designated trails and off fragile vegetation. He helped design backcountry campsites to better control indiscriminate camping and helped develop composting toilets to deal with ever-increasing amounts of human waste in an environmentally



Robert Proudman. APPALACHIAN
TRAIL CONSERVANCY

sensitive way. There seems to be little in today's world of minimizing human impact in the backcountry that doesn't trace back to Bob's work.

The AT, overseen in its entirety by the National Park Service, is unique in being the first example of the federal government deputizing a nonprofit agency, the ATC, to be a “guarantor” (Bob's phrase) of day-to-day activities and management. This system, originally called a delegation agreement and known today as a cooperative agreement, was in large measure thanks to Bob's dedication and trust. With so many people involved, from paid ATC staff, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, 31 trail clubs, state lands, and private lands yet to be transferred to federal ownership—it's a testament to Bob's skills as a negotiator and coalition builder that this seemingly impossible arrangement not only worked but thrives today. Bob didn't gloss over differences—and there have been many over the years—but he was trusted by nearly everyone involved with managing the AT from Georgia to Maine. His trail management expertise was sought beyond the AT's footprint, as well. He enjoyed consulting projects in distant lands, including China, Mongolia, and the Succulent Karoo in Africa.

Maybe less known today are Bob's numerous accomplishments as a climber. In the 1960s, he put up many first ascents on rock and ice in the White Mountains and throughout New England, including the first winter ascent of Sam's Swan Song on Cannon Mountain.

Bob Proudman's contributions to the mountains could fill many written pages. Maybe what's most important to remember is Bob's smile, his sense of humor, and his kindness. He was a much-loved colleague who found ways to build trust and bridge gaps with many different partners and interests. He could always be counted on to listen to all sides, to seek common ground while maintaining a fierce dedication to his life's work of protecting the AT. And he knew how to break up a tense moment with well-placed wit and humor.

On his retirement in 2015, Bob was the first recipient of the ATC's Proud Man/Proud Woman award. In a conversation with Hawk Metheny, the ATC's New England regional director, Bob expressed concern about having an award named for him. But he relented when Hawk explained it was really about being proud to serve, something Bob embodied. Today this award is the highest recognition ATC gives to an employee.

Despite his long list of accomplishments, Bob was forever humble. He had a gift for making conversation not about himself but about the people around him.

Bob is survived by his two children, Katie and Ben. He lived long enough to spend time with his first grandchild, Jack. A friendly, garrulous storyteller, Bob also had a reclusive side, dedicated to spiritual pursuits and time spent in a modest cabin near his mountain roots in the Mahoosuc Range. He was an active member of his church and church choir in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, where he lived for many years and was dedicated to his community and his friends.

Bob Proudman will be missed by all of us who worked with him, had the pleasure of his friendship, and were touched by his dedication to the mountains. We can take joy in sharing our memories and in knowing that his work on behalf of the AT and the mountains will endure for many years to come.

—Rebecca Oreskes

Writer's note: Special thanks to Hawk Metheny and Laura Waterman for their insights while I was working on this piece.