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Back in Time on Katahdin

Channeling Myron Avery

Following a 1929 ramble in Maine

William Geller and Jim Logan



ON A COOL CRYSTAL SEPTEMBER DAY, FIVE YEARS AGO, WE MADE our way over Traveler Mountain, a volcanic ridge in the quiet northern end of Baxter State Park. We crossed its high point, the Peak of the Ridges (3,254 feet high), Center Ridge, and stepped onto the Traveler Trail. Each time we rested and looked west, Dry Gorge appeared as the dominant vein of dark trees in the west side of Pogy Notch. We squinted down at the crescent-shaped nameless pond to its south. We knew Maher Pond lay just north, but we could not see it. To our south were Traveler Gap, Traveler Pond, and South Traveler Mountain with its bald summit. This day's journey had proved magical. Would Dry Gorge, the ponds, and the other areas named Traveler seem as special tomorrow?

We were here because we'd searched old area guides and articles and learned that in 1929 Myron Avery—longtime chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference, energetic traveler, writer, and promoter of this land—had walked through these two areas. Avery described that trip in “The Deadwater Mountains,” a 1930 article appearing in *The Maine Naturalist* (April 1930, X no. 1). At the time, the area was in early stages of recovery from the devastating Wassataquoik fire of 1903. We liked the idea of visiting this land, which had been growing back undisturbed since it had burned. We could find no more information about this area, filled with unnamed ponds, gaps, and gorges, more recent than Avery's 1930 article—all that excited our curiosity more. Could we experience what Avery had 80 years before? Could we find old trails or roads, or signs of human visits? Would we see evidence of the great fire?

We ended up taking two trips through the area. The first was in 2010 along the Traveler Trail. Two years later, we went back to the lower elevations, bushwhacking for two days from Upper South Branch Pond. On the first day, we visited Traveler Gap, Traveler Pond, and the summit of South Traveler Mountain (2,677 feet high); on the second day, we hiked into Maher Pond and to the foot of Dry Gorge. Avery had started his trip across the Travelers from Old City, an old logging camp on Wassataquoik Stream. He'd walked north through the land burned in 1903, seeing young poplar growth and charred trees. The summit of South Traveler and its ridge to Traveler Gap were barren and rocky. In the gap, Avery had seen burned woods, just as he

Myron Avery, center, as he looked a few years after he explored the remote Traveler Mountain. In this August 19, 1933, photo, Avery, a lawyer who led the effort to establish the Appalachian Trail, stands on Katahdin's Baxter Peak with a measuring wheel, his tool during the 16 years he spent calculating the AT route. With him are two hiking friends, A.H. Jackman, left, and J.F. Schairer. COURTESY OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY

had on the south side of the mountain. He made no mention of the old tote road that ran from the logging camp at Upper South Branch Pond through the gap, down to and around the south side of Traveler Pond and on to MacDonald's Bowlin Camps on the East Branch of the Penobscot River.

We tried to find traces of the old tote road that had remained on Appalachian Mountain Club maps through 1993, even though it was described as "much overgrown" as early as 1938. According to old Katahdin guides, the road left the Pogy Notch Trail 1.3 miles south of Upper South Branch Pond at a sharp right turn by a large birch. We found the sharp right turn at 1.3 miles, but no sign of a birch or old road or footpath. Once on our compass line (139 degrees north), some places felt like old roadway, but all of them quickly faded. Whether the huge poplars—perhaps 18 inches in diameter and starting to topple from old age—are those Avery saw in their infancy we don't know. On one rocky knoll, we found a number of large red pines, with branches still growing near their bases, growing in the poor soil.

WE KNEW THAT OLD TOTE ROADS GENERALLY RUN PERPENDICULAR to the land contour, so that horse-drawn sleds would not slip sideways. We made two sweeps across the mountainside under the gap, looking for erosion to suggest the old tote road. We found no signs, either below or in the gap. The gap's east side is steeper, and in that hillside we found the only obvious road cut. As we ate lunch, a deer browsed on the far side of Traveler Pond.

To reach South Traveler, we reversed our course to the gap and went up the once-barren ridgeline Avery had come down. Birches shaded a fern-covered floor, and at the ridge crest, scattered spruce mixed with mountain ash and shadbush. The scree-like rocky areas weave a path to the fully bald peak, where the views looked the same as those Avery enjoyed. To the south stood the Turners, Sable, and Katahdin peaks. In the west, Dry Gorge resembled a dark line and the unnamed pond south of Dry Gorge came just in view. We couldn't see Maher Pond—just the depression in which it rests. Pogy Notch lay near the South Branch Ponds, which looked like a fjord between South Branch Mountain and the Travelers.

The following day, we set out for Dry Gorge and Maher Pond. Avery's return route had brought him south through the South Branch Ponds area. Once into Pogy Notch, he had climbed out by going west just south of Dry Gorge. On the plateau above the notch, he had come to the nameless pond he'd spotted a few days earlier. From the pond, he had traveled about a half-mile north to the edge of Dry Gorge, which he'd followed west. He had



The view from South Traveler Mountain. When Myron Avery stood here in 1929, he looked across burnt land and his trailless route over the Traveler ridgeline. JIM LOGAN

estimated the depth of the gorge as about 300 feet and described terraced beaver ponds.

We tramped through Pogy Notch to where the trail crosses to the west side of the notch. There, we set our compasses (312 degrees north), to lead us to Dry Brook not too far below the brook that drains the no-name pond. A significant amount of rain a few days prior helped us find the Maher outlet trickle that enters from the north. The tiny stream is a long cascading waterway that flattens out a little before reaching the pond.

Maher Pond sits on a plateau with North Pogy visible to the south from its outlet. The pond, surrounded by spruce and fir, has a number of rock outcrops at its shores. After lunch at the outlet, we set a compass course (152 degrees north) directly to the east end of Dry Gorge. Once in the gorge, we walked upstream on its banks, which gradually gave way to rock-strewn sidewalls of the gorge's cliffs. The wall on the south side rose above the trees and certainly looked to be 200 to 300 feet high as Avery had estimated. At the wall, the stream took a bend, and before us was a waterfall of about 60 feet. The water poured out of a rock-clogged spout. Had Avery seen this, he certainly would have mentioned it.

From the top of the falls, we could see east down the gorge to Traveler Mountain. Avery mentioned that from the Traveler, he saw the sun reflecting on what he thought might be water in the gorge. Above the falls, the water



Jim Logan bushwhacks to a 1,500-foot knob above Pogy Notch. WILLIAM GELLER

flowed under the rock floor of the gorge, and the V shape of the side walls pressed in. We were out of time and turned around, understanding why it is called Dry Gorge, but not knowing what lay beyond.

IN JULY 2013, WE RETURNED TO SATISFY OUR CURIOSITY. OUR ROUTE this time may have been close to Avery's. The compass line west from Pogy Notch led us to the no-name pond nestled in a hardwood bowl under North Pogy and rimmed with large spruce. From here, we followed the ridge and paralleled the Dry Gorge rim, stopping at the west end, where we found the old beaver works that Avery had mentioned. The stream fed into the gorge but instead of substantive waterfalls, it produced only bright green moss-covered rocks. With the forest burned, Avery would have easily seen the cliffs in the gorge. The water reflection he'd seen was not the short needle-wide beaver ponds hidden behind an "S" turn at the head of the gorge, but most likely the lower falls. A sense of closure enveloped us.

Our two trips highlighted several things. First, the forests are still recovering from the great fire of more than a century ago; burnt stumps still stand as evidence. Second, the peaks in Baxter State Park are beautiful, but so are the "non-peaks." Trails take the tramper to some sites and not others. Park rules for bushwhacking require hikers to stay nights at reserved camping areas, but that presented no problem for us. We found plenty of solitude in the

untraveled places as implied in the “climbers’ jar” atop South Traveler. We were the first party to sign in since a 2009 hiker placed it there (although we have since met two others who have been up). We found no evidence of anyone else visiting Dry Brook, Maher Pond, or the no-name pond.

From the rim of Dry Gorge, we set a compass bearing (132 degrees north) for a 1,500-foot unnamed knob that we could not see and assumed had cliffs facing south and east. We hoped this might be the outcrop to the west off Pogy Notch Trail and north of Pogy Pond that the 1942 Katahdin guide, which we suspect Avery helped write, mentioned, but gave no exact location. In the mid-afternoon sun on the ledges, with oriented maps and a wonderful view of Pogy Pond, Wassataquoik Valley, and Katahdin, we talked about bushwhacking options and possible routes for the next day.

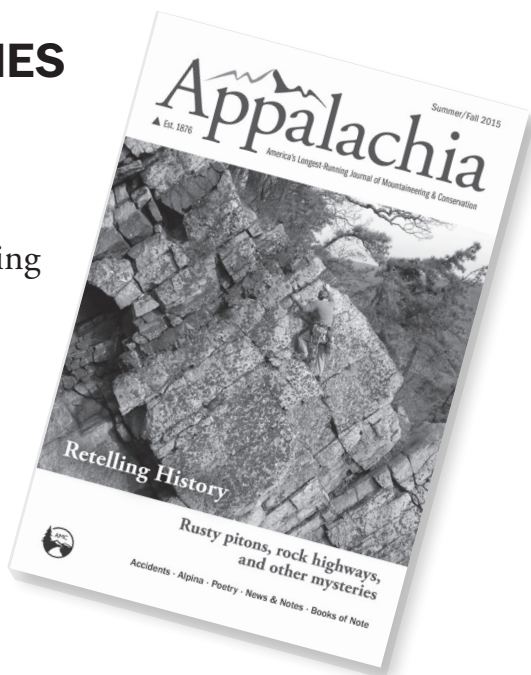
WILLIAM GELLER is the retired comptroller of the University of Maine at Farmington. He has been working for a few years on the history of logging and sporting camps in the Maine Woods, and *Appalachia* has published several of his articles, with more to come. JIM LOGAN lives in western Maine and has hiked in much of the state for the last 30 years. Since 1993, he has owned a used bookstore, Twice-Sold Tales, in Farmington, Maine.

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