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## A trail man's passion

Taos backpacking guru to be honored for Appalachian Trail work



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Courtesy photo

"Backpacker Bill" Kemsley and his dog Stanzi.

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By Staci Matlock  
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William Kemsley Jr. has trekked thousands of trail miles across the United States, coast to coast and over many a mountain range. The Taos resident, who just turned 90, parlayed his love of hiking and trails into a career, launching Backpacker magazine in 1973 to teach people basic outdoor etiquette.

Through the magazine and with the help of two other avid hikers, Kemsley lobbied Congress for the \$90 million it took to buy private parcels and complete the 2,190 mile Appalachian Trail. It is the longest hiking-only trail in the world, now visited by more than 3 million people a year.

Kemsley is among four people who will be inducted into the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame May 4 in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania.

"There was no one publication that spoke to the needs of backpackers until Bill Kemsley started Backpacker Magazine in 1973," wrote Hall of Fame organizers in announcing his award. "At Backpacker, he published numerous articles and editorials on the Appalachian Trail. He lobbied, held meetings and testified before various hearings in Washington to pass HR 8803 (the Appalachian Trail Act) in 1978.

Kemsley also co-founded the American Hiking Society.

"Bill was one of the leaders responsible for where we are today in hiking and backpacking," said Paula Guerrein, a Florida hiker. "He is really an expert about anything you want to know about hiking and staying safe on trails."

Kemsley grew up in a Detroit, Michigan suburb at a time when families had picnics together on Sundays and took long walks through the woods. "The only way you socialized was person-to-person," he said in a recent interview.

His parents camped out with him under the stars when he was a baby. As a youth, he joined his parents for long walks. At 17, he joined the U.S. Navy at the tail end of World War II and was sent to Okinawa as the war ended.

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He spent most of his adult life around the Catskill Mountains in southeastern New York state freelance writing and then working in sales and marketing. In between working and helping his wife raise their six children, he hiked. A lot.

Hiking was a solitary venture, and he liked it that way. But as the 70s got underway and the Baby Boomer generation went back to the land, his beloved trails, especially on the Appalachian, began to get crowded with other people. They left behind campfires still burning and trash. He thought a magazine with articles about the best gear and tips for better hiking might be a way to educate these "newcomers."

In 1973, he published Backpacker Magazine. After its first edition, its subscription base grew to 80,000 people. He sold the magazine seven years later. Today, it still boasts a circulation topping 350,000.

Shortly after he began publishing the magazine, he was asked to get hikers to testify before a Congressional oversight committee about the Appalachian Trail. "I called every organization that had anything to do with the Appalachian Trail. I called the Sierra Club. I called the Audubon Society. Every other organization I could think of," Kemsley recalled. "No one showed up."

They had other battles to fight.

The only other people who came to testify was Jim Kern of the Florida Trail and hiker Paul Pritchard.

But Kemsley and others worried without more protection, the Appalachian Trail would be lost to development.

The three men met after the hearing and knew if hikers didn't band together, other trails also would be lost to all terrain vehicles, snowmobiles and "others whose interests were different from ours."

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Together they began the American Hiking Society, which to this day is the largest organization lobbying to protect trails.

Kemsley turned the magazine into a powerful voice for the Appalachian Trail. Like other cross-country trails, it was little more than a name. The trail had gaps in it where the land was privately owned. No money was devoted to maintaining it.

After four years of lobbying, Congress passed the act funding the Appalachian Trail and acquiring more than 400 parcels of land it took to make the trail whole.

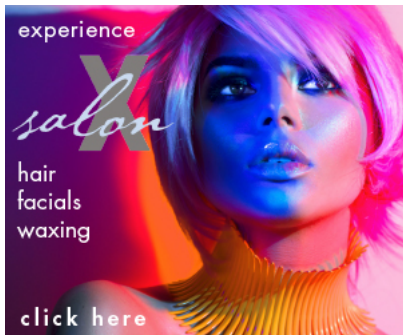
"Without the Congressional action, it would all have been developed," Guerrin said. "Bill showed us you have to get out there and use your voice, put together coalitions."

Guerrin said there are two kinds of hikers: those that power through for the cardio workout and those that stop along the way to enjoy the scenery. "Bill is one who really enjoys not just going on a hike and the endorphins, but taking time for personal reflection and enjoying nature," said Guerrin, who has hiked with him. Plus, she said, he's a really great storyteller.

Honored along with Kemsley by the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame in May will be the late Elizabeth Levers of New York, New York; the late George Masa, of Asheville, North Carolina; and Robert Peoples, of Hampton, Tennessee.

Kemsley said, at 90, he doesn't hike up and down mountains much anymore, but he still gets out and walks the woods a couple of miles a day. He's on the board of an effort now to make whole a dozen other major trails in the nation. And he has a hiking blog: Three Tips for Geezers.

He says he's slowed down, but it doesn't sound that way.



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"He's an inspiration to all of us," Guerrin said.

Kemsley's blog, Three Tips for Geezers is at [williamkemsley.com/three-tips-geezer-hikers](http://williamkemsley.com/three-tips-geezer-hikers)