

Join outdoor enthusiast Sandi Pierson as she brings you from Massachusetts to Canada over the beautiful Green Mountains of Vermont on the historic, 100-year-old Long Trail. Compiled from her four hikes of this 270-mile, sometimes austere "footpath in the wilderness," each chapter is sprinkled with peculiar historical events of the Green Mountains and of the trail itself. As the chapters unfold, so does the author's life, including her relationships with her son and four sisters.

Scraped Knees and Mac N' Cheese, One Woman's Journey of a Thousand Miles on the Vermont Long Trail

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Scraped Knees and Mac N' Cheese

One Woman's
Journey
of a Thousand Miles
on the
Vermont Long Trail

Sandi Pierson

Scraped Knees and Mac N' Cheese
One Woman's Journey of a Thousand Miles on the Vermont Long Trail

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Cover photo: author on Prospect Rock north of Ithiel Falls

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Foreword



There's something about that "footpath in the wilderness"

Once in a while you happen upon a place where out of the blue you feel a peculiar sense of belonging. It's a place that somehow mystifies you, a place that keeps calling you back. My friend Rich says you know when you've found such a place because your feet will stop itching. Rich was right. The 270-mile Long Trail in Vermont became one of these places in my life. At home, after an initial scattering of hikes on the Long Trail, my feet indeed began to "itch." I was caught unawares. While I ironed clothes, I found myself walking amidst the velvety balsams on Glastenbury Mountain. A tall, cold glass of water became the trickle that clenched my thirst at a spring run-off. The stars seen from my bedroom window in the dead of a black night were the stars I saw from my tiny tent nestled deep in the woods. To my astonishment, this trail did more than call me back—it grabbed me by the throat and wouldn't let go.

In the beginning I fell in love with the *idea* of hiking the Long Trail, never having actually been on it. The closest I probably came was cruising over it in Jonesville on Interstate 89 on the way to Burlington from my

home in New Hampshire. My first real glimpse of the trail was on a Vermont state map that I had picked up at a highway rest stop. I noticed a central, red-dotted line running vertically along the entire length of the map and was greatly intrigued. Later I acquired the Green Mountain Club's *Long Trail Guide* and, upon seeing the detailed topographic maps, quickly became obsessed with this interesting, continuous footpath that spanned from one end of Vermont to the other.

I had always been a woodswalker, but it wasn't until I was in my 30's that I started getting into backpacking—meaning lugging some degree of home sweet home on one's back for days or weeks at a stretch. During that time I was absorbed in a fledging homestead venture and still tangled up in parenthood, so my hiking pursuits had primarily been in the area of New Hampshire's Cardigan Mountain which sweeps up directly behind my cabin. Being just a "country mile" from the Connecticut River—our threshold to Vermont—I figured the Long Trail could expand my tramping horizons nicely.

One morning in early spring after the root crops were planted, I bushwhacked from my cabin up to Mount Cardigan, followed by my four-year-old boy and his dog Sparky. Atop the granite summit of Old Baldy (as she is fondly known), I combed out the mountains to the northwest with a pair of binoculars. On this clear, cold morning I located Camel's Hump, its discernable summit peeking out amidst the many mountain ranges that lay between us.

"That there is Camel's Hump," I said to my son, who was swinging himself around one of the metal legs of the fire tower that is perched on Cardigan.

The youngster, now interrupted from the dream state of his whimsical whirling, stopped himself. "What's over there, Mom?"

I poured a cup of coffee from my Thermos. "The Long Trail," I replied. The steam from the piping hot coffee spiraled into the air and momentarily clouded my face as I took a sip. "We're going to hike the Long Trail."

"OK, Mom," the youngster replied, having no idea what I was talking about, and then went back to swinging himself in circles.

Since that chilly morning atop Mount Cardigan, I have put over a thousand Green Mountain miles under my belt, or should I say, under the soles of several pairs of worn-out hiking boots. In 1991 I began an end-to-end hike of the Long Trail with the four-year-old and his dog; sporadically bouncing all over the map with whatever scarce and precious time afforded us. I was promptly stunned by the austerity and isolation of parts of the trail

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and how the weather in the Green Mountains could quickly become unforgiving. To me, a footpath had been defined as a manicured walkway. There were sections of the Long Trail that cured me of that perception damn fast. But despite the blood, sweat, and tears that were sometimes required by the trail, I could not stay away. I had caught a permanent case of “white blaze fever,” a term coined for those souls who become possessed by following the 2 x 6-inch paint splotches that embellish the trails and keep you on track. There is no cure for the fever.

My son and I hiked under the trail names of Woodswoman and Gnatcatcher. Once home from these early, brief expeditions, I recorded every step in my journal and anxiously planned the next escapement. Even though sometimes it felt like more driving than hiking, I was hooked. For years it seemed my existence was a balancing act between backpacking and homesteading. Both drew me like a magnet and the priorities of each collided constantly. Because we did quite a few overlaps due to travel time constraints, the first, official completion of the Long Trail would span seven years.

Five years into the boy’s and my venture, I had a brainstorm that involved the better portion of my siblings: five sisters committing to a few days each year to hike the entirety of the Long Trail beginning at the southern terminus. To my delight, my four younger sisters took to the white blazes like flies to a cold hamburger. They adopted the trail names of (youngest to oldest) Boonie, Two-Cuppa, Buffie, and Trailblazer. The two end-to-end hikes overlapped for a couple of years, thus the boy and I would revel in the gusty winds atop Jay Peak as we got closer to Canada, and a few weeks later I would be soaking in the views with the sisters atop the Glastenbury fire tower.

Shortly after the millennium’s passing, I had my own, personal Y2K event. It started with a newly-published book titled *Forest Under My Fingernails*. The author, Walter McLaughlin, had written a comprehensive and wonderfully woodsy account of his thru-hike of the Long Trail. Wow, a thru-hike! Jeesh, would I love to... No, impossible. The gardens, the fruit tree schedules, the appointments, the bills... On top of all that, what kid is going to want to spend a month in the woods with his mother? No, the complete one-month abandonment of farm and family would be impossible.

But the obsession to walk the entire length of the Green Mountain State in one shot wouldn’t lose its grip. After watching Lynne Wheldon’s video, *27 Days*, about a Long Trail thru-hike undertaken by four senior backpackers, I was completely seized. During the height of a very

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productive garden and orchard season, I abandoned it all, threw three packs together, and hit the Long Trail for a solid month with a budding teenager and his dog. (Yep, if the mutt was going to bark the bark, he was going to walk the walk with packs also.) This month-long journey through the woods with my son was a phenomenal experience.

Four years after the 2000 thru-hike, parenting had loosened its grip. I had steadily regained a good degree of my independence, and this recaptured freedom was a delight. No empty nest syndrome here. I had turned 50 and my priorities were shifting fast. It was time to welcome what the last 800 or so miles in the Vermont woods had physically and mentally prepared me for: a solo hike of the Long Trail.

This book is the culmination of all those separate walks. I had a choice of sequencing it chronologically or starting at the southern terminus and following the trail successively to the Canadian border. I decided that as a sketch of the Long Trail, it made the most sense to adopt the latter approach. Each chapter is written from the point of view of when that particular hike was taken. Each chapter is therefore not only a description of that segment of the Long Trail, but is also a snapshot in time of my fruition as a hiker and a person. Throughout the narrative of this incredible “footpath in the wilderness,” the reader can chuckle at my naive beginnings and possibly appreciate not so much how much wisdom I gained by the end, but how hard earned whatever I gained was.

At home, collecting books is my mania and reading them is my entertainment. When I wasn’t actually on the trail, I found that I got a tremendous amount of enjoyment collecting and reading books about the Long Trail and the history of the Green Mountains. As I began writing my account of the Long Trail, I couldn’t resist throwing in snippets from my reading. I hope you will enjoy this sprinkling of lore and the accounts of trail blazers and woods trampers from days long past.

Thanks for sharing my journey.



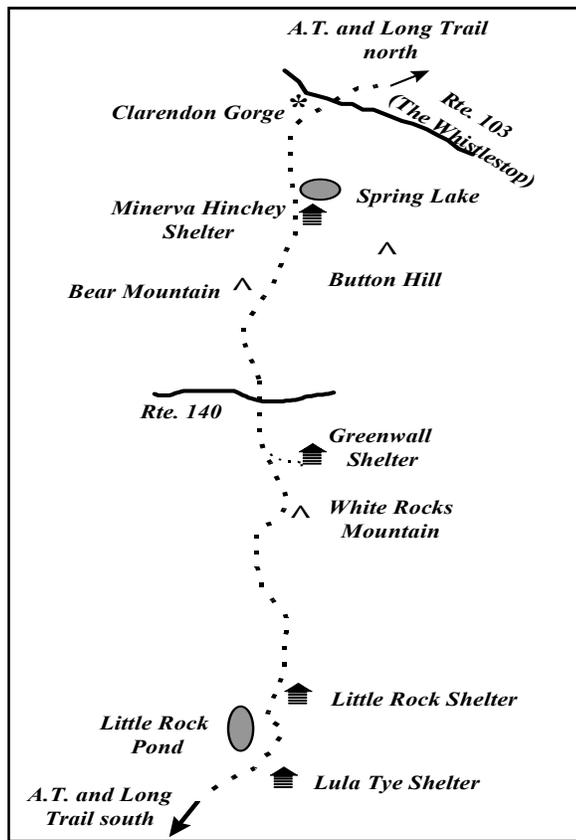
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Hook, Line, and Sinker

Little Rock Pond to the Whistlestop

Woodswoman and Gnatcatcher



A heavy vapor arose from the drenched flora when the warm sun announced its presence at Lula Tye Shelter as Gnatcatcher and I gathered our gear. Last evening, after some fierce late afternoon thunderstorms, we were thrilled to dip into Little Rock Pond after a long and sweaty day on the trail, and it was a luxury to go to bed feeling spiffy clean. It also helped to clean up a bit of an irritation snap that the boy and I had fallen into. During the night it sporadically poured buckets and we were quite pleased that the rain had completely stopped by morning. But more rain was in the forecast and I kicked myself for our late start. We had spent the night with two young and very chatty A.T. “thru-hikers” who told us—very proudly, mind you—how they had hiked up from Georgia and were looking forward to climaxing their odyssey atop Mount Katahdin in Maine. As they continually refilled my plastic coffee cup with more and more caffeine, I was easily swept up into gabbing away at least an hour that should have been spent on the trail.

I had been reading the journal entries of our two housemates in the string of southbound shelter registers and it appeared they were only walking five to seven miles each day. The hikers, who called themselves Firefly and Slow Man, were carrying very unconventional backpacking fare such as cans of spaghetti sauce, a full tub of butter, and canned sodas. I wondered how they could possibly make it to Katahdin on such short daily mileage considering it was over 500 miles away and given that the rigors of New Hampshire and Maine lay directly ahead of them. A few days later, at Sherburne Pass, another hiker would tell us that Firefly and Slow Man had indeed come up from Georgia but were sporadically yellow-blazing for *hundreds* of miles at a time! To me, that actually sounded like a fun trip—but I’m not sure I’d be touting a thru-hiking status while doing so. In any case, the tarrying twosome were very courteous and friendly and made for delightful and quirky housemates—so I still gave them an A-plus as hikers.

After stuffing the last bit of gear into the top of my pack, I grabbed the shelter register to sign in and out. Gnatcatcher quickly stated that he had already done so yesterday. I opened up the spiral notebook and saw that the last entry was in the boy’s unmistakable juvenile handwriting. It simply read: “Hiking with your mom sucks.” Realizing that we parents *can* duly earn such proclamations, I pretended not to see it and hastily jotted down a happy postcard-type greeting—having a great time!—and signed it “Gnatcatcher’s Mom.” (Let the hikers muse over those two side-by-side entries!) And this morning we really were having a great time. One thing I’ll

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say about the skirmishes that arise between Gnatcatcher and me—both off and on the trail—they genuinely disappear as quickly as they appear.

As Firefly and Slow Man lazed about in their Crazy Creek foam seats deliberating over a map, Gnatcatcher and I hoisted our packs and in a jiffy we were on the stony trail skirting Little Rock Pond. We passed the tent site of my long-ago solo hike (now sporting a “No Camping” sign) and paused to snap a few photos of the water before stepping into the wet woods.

About a mile from the pond we came upon some striking stone walls and an assortment of archaic foundations from the Aldrichville logging village, circa 1880's. Operating for twenty years, according to a delightful, compact book published in 2007 by the Green Mountain Club titled *Place Names on Vermont's Long Trail*, the logging village we were walking through was described as having a steam-powered mill, blacksmith shop, boarding house, several residences, and a school.

There are no shortages of old stone walls in these New England woods, and coming upon them in the dense forest never fails to fascinate me. They are an incredible testimony to the bona fide, solid labor carried out by our forefathers (and mothers) at a time when just about all of rural New England was divvied up by stone walls. Full size books have been written about them. With the blitz of modern instant building techniques, forestry machines the size of small houses, the sweep of industrial agriculture, and the corner pins for property lines being a piece of rebar pounded in to the ground, stone walls have now been reduced to a decorative undertaking.

Our hike uphill to the summit of White Rocks Mountain was steady, but the gems we discovered at the height of it were well worth the huffing and puffing. Our first treat was a unique, isolated outcropping of rocks protruding from the forest floor which I dubbed as the Long Trail Stonehenge. It wouldn't be hard to convince me that some ancient civilization had placed these stones in perfect synchronization to selected otherworldly influences. Just north of Stonehenge we were stopped short in our tracks and gazed in amazement at countless clusters of artistic cairns and architectural masterpieces constructed with seemingly *zillions* of freestanding Quartzite rocks. The calculation and ingenuity of this mountaintop art gallery was awe-inspiring. I like to imagine that little gnomes came out of the woods at night to build these amusing assemblies or, at the very least, by children frolicking on a Sunday afternoon.

This extraordinary landscape is part of the 36,400-acre White Rocks National Recreation Area which from the area towns has vehicle access points that will bring the sightseer to numerous side trails as well as a pretty

picnic area. Upon once reading that there was a trail below that led to a glacial rock slide hosting year-round ice beds, on a day trip I went looking for it. On a ninety-degree August afternoon, I indeed stuck my head in a refrigerated fissure and gazed in awe at a bed of ice.

Leaving White Rocks Mountain, our plan was to have a snack break at Greenwall Shelter before the alleged nosedive down to Route 140. When we got to the shelter spur trail, we met a hiker who convinced us otherwise. Merging onto the Long Trail, a panting woman saw us and went into an immediate tailspin. “That shelter is more than two-tenths of a mile off of the Long Trail! And pure uphill all the way back! I’m exhausted just from the hike out of there! I wish whoever *wrote* the Long Trail Guide had actually *hiked* the trail!” (On her behalf, I have to admit that this is not the first time I’ve heard that last bit.) Turning her red face away from us, she hastily stormed off southbound as if in pursuit of the perpetrator.

Compounding her state of affairs, I’m sure, was the large, external-frame backpack she was shouldering that looked jam-packed to the hilt. I wondered how elaborate her cooking and sleeping systems were and how many nonessential items were crammed into that bathtub she was adhered to. In fact, it reminded me of my early backpacking days before I realized the definite correlation between pack weight and physical stamina on the trail.

Knowing the difficulty in and out of Greenwall Shelter probably *was* a matter of the irritable woman’s perception, Gnatcatcher and I still decided against adding four-tenths of a mile to our day and headed straight down to Route 140—and I mean *straight down*. We plummeted steeply through a narrow ravine and held on for dear life to whatever branches and small trees we could get our hands on. Accompanying us in the gully was a course of water gushing fast and furious, sometimes creating spectacular waterfalls. Sparky had seen the descent and said thanks but no thanks, and bushwhacked around it through the woods.

When the psychological rush of the ravine plummet was over, we crossed a dirt road and shortly came to a branch of Otter Creek where it sidles up to Wallingford Gulf Road (Route 140). Directly after crossing the wide paved road, we ascended to where a new Long Trail parking lot was located, and then onto an attractive landscape that was clearly bygone farm acreage. We followed a fern-filled lane up to a field of gone-wild apple trees and found a nice spot to enjoy a bite to eat.

Leaving the pastoral setting, we passed through a myriad of stone walls and gently ascended on a bed of evergreen needles before beginning a

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serious ascent through a well-preserved, hardwood forest to the peak of Bear Mountain. This section of trail was a new relocation that replaced the hike over the gentler rise of Button Hill to the east. The steepness of the hike up Bear Mountain was buffered with an exceptionally well-graded trail and this made for more of a cardiac hammering than an ankle hammering.

We had not seen any water since crossing Route 140 so Sparky was quite delighted to find a vernal pool near the summit. The trail continued to be well-graded on the descent and we were soon brought to scenic Patch Hollow, a sizeable, sunny opening within the dense forest that hosted more apple trees. A mile north of Patch Hollow we came to one of the finest shelters on the Long Trail, Minerva Hinchey. Not only is the shelter site itself pleasant, but the surrounding area more so. The shelter's namesake took over the GMC secretarial post in 1955 after Lula Tye's twenty-nine year tenure. Gosh, they must have to pry those secretaries from their desks—Minerva Hinchey held the position for twenty-two years, not retiring until she was eighty-two!

On my subsequent solo hike, I had taken the time to explore the nearby fields and overgrown county lanes that are in close proximity to Minerva Hinchey Shelter. I found the area absolutely lovely, with the highlight being the short jaunt to Spring Lake—a backwoods body of water that is totally unspoiled despite its smidgen of vehicular access. Across from the shelter is a grove of evergreen trees and on that solo hike, the soft earth mimicked a cushioned bed that had been too irresistible to pass up. Even though rain had been in the forecast, I had pitched my tent on the forest floor and was afforded one of the longest, uninterrupted, peaceful sleeps I can recall on the trail. I remember waking up to the calming resonance of raindrops falling on the tent walls from the branches above, and this had fully permeating my consciousness. I had packed up feeling like a Buddha under the Bodhi Tree.

Leaving Minerva Hinchey that morning with a friendly, older fellow who had spent the night inside the shelter, we ascended steeply to a grassy road where aged but working power lines crossed the landscape. It was here that we both saw a deer poking about under a large wild apple tree and the dog did not. We froze in our steps and watched this beautiful animal through the muted haziness of the early morning rain. It had been wonderful to share this impromptu snapshot in the woods with a hiking comrade. When the deer had gotten wind that there was indeed others nearby, she quickly disappeared into the woods, her white tail flagging wildly back at us. We smiled and walked on. When hiking with a dog, such a grand encounter is extremely rare.

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Back to the present with Gnatcatcher, after crossing the power lines we began a drop toward Route 103, and when we heard the distant roaring of water crashing through Clarendon Gorge, we knew we were getting close to the road. The celebrated Clarendon Gorge (which ironically is neither in the Town of Clarendon nor part of the nearby Clarendon River) is a very popular swimming spot that easily lures the trail-worn hiker into its rousing, deep waters. But we had bigger fish to fry—or have them fried for us. After unearthing a supply cache at Route 103, we were detouring a half mile down the road to the Whistlestop Café where I planned on getting the *big* ‘ol fried fish sandwich, a *towering* chocolate milkshake, and the *giant* order of greasy onion rings that had been on my mind all morning. And that sucker will be topped off with a triple-scoop ice cream cone. Of course, the dreamy contemplation of such trail fare was cruelly teased by haunting downfalls. Would the restaurant really be open? What if we got there and it had burned down the night before? What if this was The Twilight Zone and Route 103 was never found?

Crossing the seemingly mile-high swaying footbridge over Clarendon Gorge’s roaring waters is always a head trip for hikers, but for the mutt it was a once in a lifetime feat (meaning he never wanted to repeat it). Near the footbridge we saw a sign dedicating it to a person named Robert Brugmann. What we did not know at the time was that, according to the GMC’s *Place Names* book, Brugmann was a seventeen-year-old hiker who drowned in the gorge while trying to cross the river because a flood had swept away the former bridge.

After leaving the gorge, we quickly came to the gravel parking lot where Gnatcatcher located and administered the cache. With the blissful vision of a lunch menu swimming in our little brains, we headed up the wide paved road and promptly came upon Marker #37 (a stone monument) identifying the obsolete Crown Point Military Road. I quickly got the feeling we were walking the wrong way—and this is serious business to the long-distance backpacker when a restaurant is involved. I had recently read about this statewide, east-west military road and found it interesting to see one of the markers. Built about 250 years ago, bits and pieces of the legendary route are still used as roadways. There are seventy-seven markers pinpointing its original course.

As I fished out and checked Mr. Natural’s Long Trail handbook as to our orientation, Gnatcatcher fidgeted about with impatience and started kicking a small stone up an overgrown road leading into the woods. I was stunned when he brought to my attention an aged “FBI Wanted” poster

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nailed to a fence, offering a \$25,000 reward for information about the 1996 murders of Lollie Winans and Julianne Williams. The two girls were killed (presumably as a hate crime because they were lesbians) while tenting near the Appalachian Trail in the Shenandoah Park. At this writing the case still remains up in the air, though I understand there was once a concrete suspect.

After realizing that we definitely were not heading toward the Whistlestop, we got back on track—literally, considering the Whistlestop was once a train depot. The railroad tracks we followed were part of yet another first east-west passageway in Vermont, and a great celebration took place when the railroad tracks from the east and from the west finally met atop nearby Mount Holly in 1849.

Finally getting to the Whistlestop (and not a moment too soon!), we found it was indeed still standing and folks were bustling in and out. We perused and ordered our fares from a very pleasing menu. I went into the bathroom to wash my hands and saw a stern note on the wall telling hikers not to use the bathroom sink for baths or hair washings.

Even though the sky was darkly overcast and the air seemed to be almost begging for the rain to start falling, we opted to eat outside at a picnic table so that Sparky could enjoy his own fish and chips in our company. As we waited for our meals to be served, I mentioned that I hoped we could eat, get back to the trail, and walk the one mile to the next shelter before getting drenched. Gnatcatcher had other ideas.

“Why don’t we get a motel for the night?” he suggested.

“Well, for one thing, there’s a bunch of miles between us and a motel,” I replied.

Not one to easily retreat from such an idea, Gnatcatcher continued. “The waitress told me there’s a phone booth just a few minutes up the road at a small store. We could call a taxi.” (My, my, the boy’s been a busy little beaver during my brief absence!)

As I dug into my heaping pile of onion rings, I actually started pondering Gnatcatcher’s idea. OK, let me think. The motels on the Route 7 end of Rutland are only six or seven miles from here. Indeed taxis would be a dime a dozen in the city. It looks like it’s going to pour out. Tomorrow it would be a straight twelve-mile shot up Killington Mountain where we’d spend the night at Cooper Lodge. This would be followed by a mere morning stroll down to the Inn at Long Trail at Sherburne Pass for a day of rest and lounging. Sounds like a plan!

As the meal on my plate steadily disappeared, my little brain was swirling with the evening’s possibilities. I smiled knowing that in less than

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an hour we could be luxuriating with full-size beds, electric lights, and a flushing toilet. How does a full, hot bath sound, girl? Maybe even watch a little *Bonanza* on TV Land tonight with a small pizza. Nah, make it a large.

That this was all unanticipated perked up the gray matter even more. I looked up at the unsuspecting Gnatcatcher. Poor kid. Stuck out here in the woods with his middle-aged mother. Day after day of instant oatmeal, broken Pop Tarts, bug-bitten legs, and muddy boots. Instead of happily exclaiming that, "Yes! We're on our way to Motelville!" I just started hemming and hawing quite audibly.

"What?" he asked of my noises.

I sighed and looked solemnly at my empty plate. "Well... I suppose... A motel, you say, huh?"

The boy was pleasantly taken aback. "Well, gosh, it sure looks like it's ready to *pour* out."

"Well, if you say so. After all, you do carry half the load and do the miles."

Gnatcatcher smirked at the words that had come back not to haunt him but, instead, held some degree of influence. He had thrown out the bait, mom nibbled, and he reeled her in hook, line, and sinker.



Forever the cribbage board!

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A welcoming sight near the Route 103 road crossing



*A not-so-welcoming sight near the Route 103 road crossing:
a reward for the murder of two hikers on the Appalachian Trail.
No one was ever prosecuted for the crime.*

Join outdoor enthusiast Sandi Pierson as she brings you from Massachusetts to Canada over the beautiful Green Mountains of Vermont on the historic, 100-year-old Long Trail. Compiled from her four hikes of this 270-mile, sometimes austere "footpath in the wilderness," each chapter is sprinkled with peculiar historical events of the Green Mountains and of the trail itself. As the chapters unfold, so does the author's life, including her relationships with her son and four sisters.

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