

The Longwood Gardens Library and Archives staff invites you to use the following guide to discuss the topics of our 2016 Community Read book.

**An Overview:**

***Determined – Resourceful – Tenacious – Secretive – Nature lover – Self-educated – Poet***

These are just a few descriptors that come to mind as one reads the inspirational story of a 67-year-old great-grandmother who was the first woman to complete a solo 2,050 mile thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in 1955—May 3rd through September 25th.

Throughout her lifetime, Emma Gatewood, otherwise known as Grandma Gatewood, seemed to be unknowingly preparing for this walk. She had always relished walks in the woods, communing with nature, gardening, and farming. Through raising eleven children and doing all the manual work on a farm, Emma acquired the skills of perseverance, self-reliance, and resourcefulness. Her wilderness survival skills as well as her strong desire for independence were honed partially as a result of her ability to survive a brutally abusive 30-plus year marriage. Her numerous hikes in area woods provided her with a restorative sense of peace as well as an escape from her husband's tyranny. Although Emma received formal education through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, her insatiable thirst for knowledge continued throughout her life. She learned through extensive reading and practical experience, e.g., learning about woodland flora and fauna on her many walks. Not only did the woodlands provide a respite for Emma, but they also inspired her to explore her creative side—writing poetry.

In her earlier years, Emma Gatewood's father told her to "pick up your feet". (p. 5) She followed these instructions throughout her life, and did so on the Appalachian Trail when faced with extreme weather conditions, assorted obstacles, and dangers. Emma was clearly a tenacious woman who had the desire to accomplish what she had set out to do—something no other woman had done before; hiking the entire Appalachian Trail in one continuous journey, without map, tent, sleeping bag, compass, or hiking boots!

**WHY** did she embark on this insurmountable hike? This is a question that she playfully brushed aside each time she was asked. Her response, "Because it was there, she'd say. Seemed like a good lark, she'd say." (p. 4)<sup>1</sup> Ben Montgomery offers many suggestions and examples of Emma's various responses, which leaves the reader pondering their own interpretations of Emma's true motivations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Page numbers refer to *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* by Ben Montgomery as published by Chicago Review Press (First Edition) © 2014



But Grandma Gatewood didn't keep her feet idle for long, or her desire to accomplish adventurous quests. She was not only the first woman to successfully complete an Appalachian Trail thru-hike once, but twice two years later at the age of 69, and a third hike in sections ten years later at age 77. This remarkable elderly, but spunky, woman continued to accumulate miles, including 2,000 miles of the Oregon Trail in 95 days at the age of 71, "until she had walked more than fourteen thousand miles, more than halfway around the earth, putting her in the slim company of astonishing pedestrians." (p.244) She became quite a celebrity, and newspapers called her "the female hiking champion of the United States—maybe of the world" and a "living legend among hikers." (p.239) At the age of 82, she marked and blazed a hiking trail through Gallia County, Ohio to help create a connection to the Buckeye Trail. Her legacy will endure forever as evidenced by her induction into the second class of the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame on June 7, 2012. Her story, determination, and desire to hike the Appalachian Trail in its entirety will remain a captivating inspiration.



**Community Read**  
Read. Think. Engage.

## Discussion Topics:

### Motivation

1. Emma Gatewood was interviewed by numerous newspaper and magazine reporters about her Appalachian Trail hike experiences while she was thru-hiking in 1955. She offered an assortment of reasons about why she was walking. One of Ben Montgomery's interpretations states, "Maybe she was trying to articulate that exploring the world was a good way to explore her own mind." (p. 160)
  - What is the significance of his statement?
  - Do you agree with Ben Montgomery's interpretation?
  - Why or why not?
2. Emma first learned of the Appalachian Trail while reading the August 1949 issue of National Geographic during a visit to a doctor's office. "The nineteen page spread with color photographs was a 'window to another place'". (p. 15) She attempted her first hike at the northern terminus at Katahdin Mountain in Maine in 1954 at the age of 66, but was unsuccessful. Her family was unaware that she made this first attempt. "She would tell no one about this." (p. 19) Nor did they know she embarked on her second attempt a year later.
  - What do you think her reasons were for not telling her family?
  - What character traits do you think Emma demonstrates through her secretiveness about her walks?
  - How is Emma's motivation to accomplish such a difficult hike influenced by these character traits?
3. When delving into why Grandma Gatewood did what she did, Ben Montgomery believes "Emma Gatewood was honest. I also believe there's an equal chance that her stock answers were covers. (p. 257) They were honest—and also incomplete—responses to a question she couldn't bring herself to fully answer, not when she was a 'widow'". (p. 258)
  - Based upon what you have read about Emma's life circumstances and experiences, do you think she was "walking toward something..." or "...walking away"? (p.259)
  - Explain your answer.
4. Ben Montgomery believes Emma's four word answer to Why? "Because," she told a reporter, "I wanted to.", is an answer "that frustrates and satisfies." (p. 259)
  - Do you agree with his conclusion and explanation?
  - Why?



## Self-Reliance

1. “Emma had lived a dozen lives by eighteen.” (p. 24) When she was only seventeen, Emma’s father had an accident at work, and her mother had to take him to Gallipolis, Ohio for hospitalization that lasted two months. Out of necessity, Emma took charge of the household: taking care of her fourteen siblings, working the farm, cooking, mending, and cleaning. From the hogs her brothers killed she made sausage, lard, and head cheese. (p. 26) She learned how to plant various crops on the farm, and hunt for wildflowers. (p. 25) Emma completed many tasks that required a practical knowledge. She did not think about her limitations, she just did what had to be done, learning the ‘how’ through doing.
  - How do you think these experiences helped Emma prepare for her Appalachian Trail hike?
  - How did her ‘can do’ personality guide her when she faced obstacles and dangers on the A.T.?
2. At the age of eighteen, she met P.C. Gatewood and later reluctantly married him. “P. C. began treating Emma as a possession, demanding she do his work. It wasn’t what she had in mind, but she tried hard to make the best of it.” (p. 27) She endured a physically abusive marriage for over 30 years while raising eleven children.
  - Did Emma’s husband’s tyranny diminish or encourage her sense of self? Independence? Aloneness? How?
  - Can you give some examples to support your answers?
3. Emma would escape into the woods for time to be alone, away from her husband’s abuse and away from the demands of the farm and her children.
  - How did her alone time during these turbulent years impact her alone time on the Appalachian Trail?
  - How did her feelings of aloneness on the A.T. contribute to her self-confidence and sense of self?
4. After 146 days hiking on the Appalachian Trail, Emma reached the summit of Katahdin Mountain on September 25, 1955. “It took me a long time to get to the top,” she said, “and when I did and signed my name on the register, I never felt so alone in my life.” (p. 204)
  - What is your interpretation of her statement? What is your reasoning?
  - Do you think this was a positive or negative feeling? Why?



## Legacy

1. Emma Gatewood is credited with inspiring a renewed interest in the restoration and maintenance of the Appalachian Trail, “the longest continuous walking path in the world” (p. 46), based upon her observations and criticisms during and following her 1955 inaugural thru-hike.
  - How did her criticisms contribute to her legacy?
  - What impact did Grandma Gatewood’s criticisms have on the current state of the A.T.?
2. Ben Montgomery takes exception to popular opinions that Ed Garvey, 1970 thru-hiker and author of *Appalachian Hiker*, is responsible for the rise in the number of thru-hikers. (p. 253) He states “So with all due respect to the late Mr. Garvey, the spike started before his book.” (p. 254)
  - How does Grandma Gatewood’s legacy overshadow the popular belief that Mr. Garvey’s book is responsible for the rise in thru-hikers of the A.T.?
  - Can you cite examples provided in *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* that will support Ben Montgomery’s opinion?
3. According to Laurie Potteiger, Information Services Manager for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, “She has become a folk icon and a symbol of the A.T. being for any American. She is in a class by herself. ...but in terms of a folk hero, she has a special place in A.T. history. Her story is immediately fascinating.” (p. 254)
  - How did Grandma Gatewood’s first, and subsequent two Appalachian Trail hikes, generate enthusiasm for thru-hiking?
  - Why has Grandma Gatewood’s legacy continued to inspire other A. T. hikers to this day?
4. Through the advocacy of her daughter, Lucy, Emma “Grandma” Gatewood was inducted into the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame’s second class in 2012 because she was overlooked for induction into the first class. Larry Luxenberg, author of *Walking the Appalachian Trail*, who spoke at her induction stated, “Many call her the first thru-hiker celebrity. She was the hiker for the ages.” (p. 256)
  - What attributes did Grandma Gatewood possess that have inspired A.T. hikers of all ages and genders?
  - How has her minimalist style of hiking impacted the style of hiking today? Give some examples.
5. “When I’m dead and gone,” Emma told Lucy and Louise once, in a tone that was certain and not at all arrogant, “they’re going to erect monuments to me.” (p. 255)
  - What insight about Grandma Gatewood’s character can be gleaned from this statement?

