

Mel Skiles – Amazing trail maintainer

By Danny Bernstein

If you hike the Mountains-to-Sea Trail just west of the Hendersonville Road overpass, you will find a perfect trail. No rocks, roots, no impediments. You have Mel Skiles, a CMC trail maintainer, to thank for the conditions of this trail.



1 Mel Skiles on the MST

'Mel was born in the Missouri Ozarks and grew up in Elkhart, Indiana. He graduated high school in 1963 and felt he had received a good education. After Central Missouri State College, he entered medical school at the University of Missouri in Columbia.

"If you have the desire, you can learn from any institution. It doesn't have to be a highfalutin school." Mel is a perfect example of this philosophy.

But mentoring is so important, Mel emphasizes. "I will never forget my 7th grade teacher who said, 'When you become a doctor, I want to be your patient'."

Skiles chose radiology because he thought of himself as an introvert. "You have less patient contact in this specialty, though you do have some," Mel underscores. Radiology also involves physics and math, two of his favorite subjects.

After the required internship and residency, Mel and his wife Sandra settled in Madison, Indiana, a small town between Louisville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio with a 140-bed hospital. He worked as a radiologist for 36 years in what Mel refers to as the golden age of radiology.

From interpreting x-ray film, Mel went on to work with nuclear medicine, ultrasound, cat scans and MRI. All these changes kept him on his toes. "Am I staying on top of all of this?" he asked himself throughout his career.

But it wasn't all work. Mel bought a 90-acre tobacco farm in the area where he could have been paid not to farm under the U.S. government tobacco subsidies program. Instead he planted 7,000 walnut trees. Every few years, he mows the rows between the trees. "Maybe I should not have planted all the same trees," Mel says, "but I'm not going to cut them down now."

Mel and Sandra have two daughters. Kristina is a STEM teacher in Boulder, Colorado. Tamra, a professor of nursing at WCU, lives in Asheville with her husband, a sports medicine doctor, and children. When Mel visited Tamra and her family, he thought, “Wow, I love this area.”

As soon as Mel retired in 2011, he walked the Appalachian Trail. All was going well until he fell in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and broke several ribs. He was off the trails for seven weeks while he concentrated on healing. Then he returned to the A.T. as soon as he could and continued where he had left off. He wanted to be an A.T. thru-hiker. He finished on Mt. Katahdin at the end of September of that year, qualifying him to be a thru-hiker.

The next year, Mel and Sandra moved to Asheville and Mel found Carolina Mountain Club. “I wanted to give back,” Mel says. “It’s a cliché, I know, but I so appreciated good trails when I walked the A.T.”

He quickly joined the CMC Thursday trail crew and also adopted an MST section. Though he had been a practicing physician for decades, he makes sure to stay on top of his Wilderness First Aid certification, sawyer certification and other accreditation for trail maintainers.



2 MST - Mel's section

Mel, now 75 years old, feels very lucky. He's made a point of staying fit his whole life. A couple of years ago, he was interviewed by WLOS (the ABC-TV affiliate in Asheville) and told them, "My mind is free and I feel I don't have any aches or pains," he said. "I'm fortunate and I feel gratitude for that."

Currently Mel's MST section is the two miles between Fishpond Road and Highway 25A. His section passes the back of the Deerfield Retirement Community, where he and his wife live. "I try to get the roots and rocks out of the trail to encourage the old folks to walk here," he says. Though hikers (including this writer) tease him about how wide the trail is, Mel insists that he did not widen the trail. "That's the way it was when I got the section," he says.

Once he pulled out all the rocks, he made a lovely entrance way to the MST from the road.

Now during the pandemic, Mel still goes out with the Thursday maintenance crew. They work in small groups of three or four, properly distanced. Their priorities are "safety, having fun, and oh yes, get some work done." There's lots of camaraderie with the trail crew.

Mel emphasizes that he feels pride in being different. He's been a practicing vegetarian for a long time. When he was 18 and signed up for the draft, he requested "conscientious objector status" even though he did not belong to a traditional pacifist religion. It wasn't easy or popular as the Vietnam war was raging at the time.

Now Mel spends much of his time maintaining trails on the MST and on the Deerfield property. He works on one trail or another four to five times a week – that's his job. "I can walk to the trail, go home for lunch and go back out again."

"Some people feel the rain, others just get wet," Mel says, quoting Roger Miller, a country music singer. "I'm grateful for what I got."