

Grandma Emma Gatewood Story Is Being Told

Mary Hayes

Grandma Gatewood: Ohio's Legendary Hiker, a storytelling program, premiered on November 1 at the Westlake Community Center. Eden Valley Enterprises performed the story of BTA legend Grandma Gatewood. As many Buckeye Trail Association members know, Grandma Gatewood was a founding member of the BTA; she is commemorated in an especially beautiful section of the Buckeye Trail in Hocking Hills State Park.

Betty Lou Higgins of Eden Valley Enterprises began researching Emma Gatewood in 2009 as part of a collection of women's tales she titled "What's Her Story?". But after talking with Emma's daughter Lucy, Betty Lou decided to make Emma Gatewood's story a full documentary. She contacted Peter Huston of FilmAffects, and he became involved. Their plan became an effort to produce a first-person character program, a documentary for PBS, and a DVD. The Toledo-based PBS station WGTE has agreed to broadcast the documentary. Betty Lou and Peter interviewed Emma's youngest daughter Lucy, great-granddaughter Marjorie, and oldest daughter Esther (who at age 93 was still leading hikes). They obtained photos of Emma's life and visited towns where Emma lived. Grants from the National Storytelling Network and the Buckeye Trail Association helped fund this first phase of Emma's story.

Grandma Gatewood grew up in Gallia County where she was one of 17 children. She married at the age of 19, raised 11 children, divorced her abusive husband after 33 years of marriage, and at age 66 in 1954 attempted to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. An article in the National Geographic about the AT provided the motivation. Her first attempt failed, but in the process she learned many things, and left determined to complete the AT the following year. Her life of hard work and knowledge of plants and animals, along with her independent and positive attitude, gave her the necessary skills to accomplish her goal.

In 1955 she tried again, but this time she started in Georgia rather than in Maine, where she had started in 1954. She learned that she did not need all the things that she had taken along the previous year. Her load was light: a blanket, a little food, a warm coat, a plastic cloth, a cook pan, a change of clothes. She carried no compass or maps, trusting to follow the AT white blazes. Sometimes she was able to stay in a farmer's home overnight, but many nights were spent out in the open. She encountered some snakes, overgrown areas and unfriendly people. Most of all she



Documentary producers Peter Huston and Betty Lou Higgins meet BTA member Pat Hayes.

enjoyed seeing nature and its many offerings. Her hike was 2,050 miles that year, and she completed it in 145 days. She was the first woman to thru-hike the AT solo. The feat brought media attention to her and she went on several TV programs and even was the subject of an article in *Sports Illustrated*. She became quite a celebrity.

She continued hiking, taking on the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail in 1959, the AT two more times, and of course, the Buckeye Trail. All totaled, she hiked 10,000 miles between 1955 and 1969. She served on the BTA Board until 1969. Grandma Emma passed away in 1973.

Visit Eden Valley Enterprises www.edenvalleyenterprises.org to find locations where Grandma Gatewood's story will be presented and to monitor the progress of the documentary.