

Every day in YourTown, we spotlight  
a different Lorain County community:

**MONDAY:** Avon/Avon Lake

**TUESDAY:** Amherst/Vermilion/South Amherst

**WEDNESDAY:** Wellington/Oberlin

**TODAY:** North Ridgeville

**FRIDAY:** Grafton/LaGrange/Columbia

**SATURDAY:** Lorain/Sheffield/Sheffield Lake

**SUNDAY:** Elyria/Elyria Township

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## 'Grandma' Gatewood a hiking pioneer

Ohio farm woman featured Sunday in branch library talk

**Steve Fogarty**

The Chronicle-Telegram

**NORTH RIDGEVILLE** — Emma Gatewood was a late bloomer of sorts. But she more than made up for it once she got going.

At age 67 in 1955, the Gallipolis woman became the first female documented to walk what was then the entire 2,050-mile length of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

"She grew up on a farm and had done a lot of physical labor, but she had never hiked before," Bette Lou Higgins said.

The Elyria woman will present Gatewood's story in "Grandma Gatewood: Ohio's Legendary Hiker," in a 3 p.m. program Sunday at the North Ridgeville Branch Library.

There was an instance of a woman who had walked the trail before but she was not alone, Higgins said.

"Emma was the first person to do it alone," Higgins said.

Gatewood's inspiration was a 1949 National Geographic magazine article about the Appalachian Trail that mentioned it had never been walked alone by a woman.

"She decided she should and she did," Higgins said.



**Higgins**

Unlike many of Higgins' first-person portrayals of notables, her presentation on Gatewood is done as a storytelling session.

Higgins and her Eden Valley Enterprises is working on a film documentary for the Toledo PBS station. But that project will require about \$90,000.

"We're working on raising the money right now, but if we don't raise that much, we'll scale back where we film and what we can do," Higgins said.

Gatewood had attempted the Appalachian Trail once before in 1954 but didn't get very far, Higgins said.

"She broke her glasses and couldn't see, and got lost and had to be rescued by rangers," Higgins said. "So she went back home and did it the next year."

Although Gatewood undertook no training for the feat, she spent a lot of time climbing stairs as a home health worker.

At 5-feet, 2-inches and 120 pounds, Gatewood wasn't physically formidable but she was determined.

"She lost 30 pounds over the course of the trip due to the exertion," Higgins said.

And unlike today's hikers who travel with all kinds of gear and weather-protective clothing and footwear, Gatewood "had no backpack or tent, and took what she could put in a knapsack,"

Higgins said.

A shower curtain was used to protect her from the weather and to spread on wet ground beneath her.

Taking little food, she relied on the kindness of strangers living in farmhouses near the trail for food.

"A lot of people were willing to help her," Higgins said.

Wearing a pair of high-top Converse canvas tennis shoes, Gatewood pressed on. She met up with a few snakes and bears but wasn't harmed in any way.

"She made a comment once that facing a bear in the woods wasn't much of anything after raising 11 children," Higgins said.

The hike took Gatewood from May to September in 1955. Thanks to her criticism of the poor shape the trail was in, improvements were made.

"They weren't happy with her being so outspoken, but it spurred efforts to fix the trail up," Higgins said.

Gatewood wound up hiking the Appalachian Trail two more times before her death in 1973.

The Ohio woman helped create the 1,400-mile plus Buckeye Trail, and she is also honored with the Grandma Gatewood Trail in Hocking Hills State Park — "her favorite place," according to Higgins.

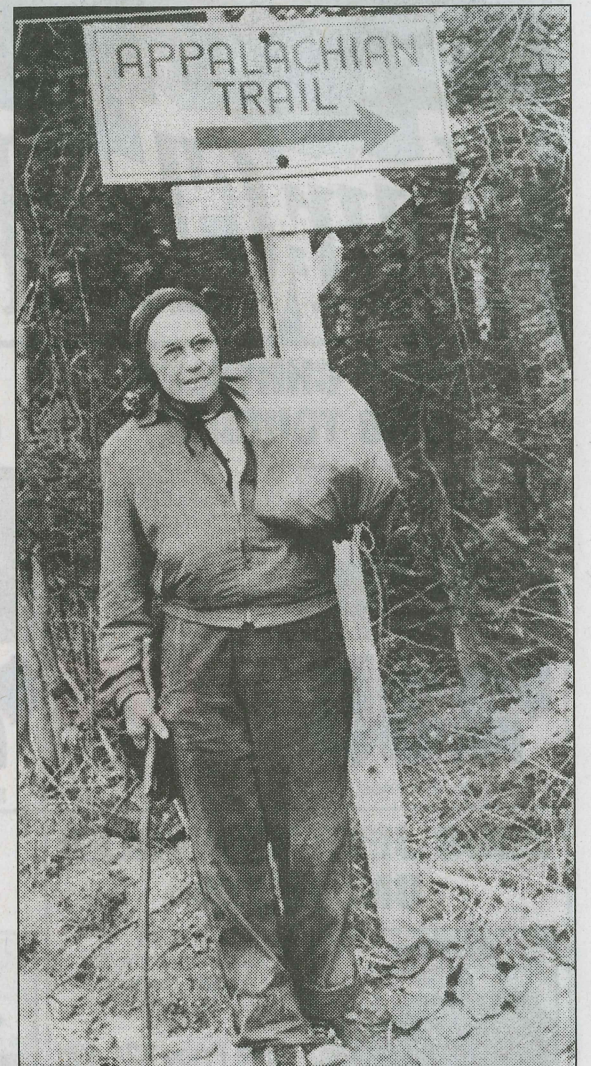


PHOTO PROVIDED

Emma "Grandma" Gatewood was the first woman to hike the Appalachian Trail solo in 1955, at age 67, and did it two more times.