

Appalachian Trail inspires LaRose to 1,600-mile hike

By BOB RIEL
Written for The Call

Have you made any summer plans yet?

Alan LaRose has. The 20-year-old resident of 27 Morin Heights plans to spend May through August walking about 1,600 miles.

Not easy miles, either. Alan is going to walk the Appalachian Trail, which winds through the mountains, from Virginia to Maine.

The trail actually begins in Georgia, and runs for 2,100 miles to Maine.

Two years ago, just out of high school, Alan attempted the trail for the first time. He covered the first 500 miles before tiring of the task and, taking a left, eventually hitchhiked out West.

"I don't know what happened," said Alan, "I had planned on doing the whole thing."

He isn't sorry, though. It was a chance to see the country. One of the highlights of the trip was when he hiked through the Grand Canyon, which he said was "beautiful."

This time around, he plans to finish the last 1,600 mile leg of the journey.

Alan said he has two reasons for making this lengthy trek and one of them is the Milk Fund.

He is now collecting pledges from area residents and businessmen and will donate the proceeds to the fund. He has enough pledges to

raise a few hundred dollars now, he said, but was hoping for much more.

Pledges can be made by contacting John R. Dionne, Milk Fund chairman, at Marquette Credit Union.

The other, more important reason for the journey is what he hopes to gain from the trip.

Alan said he is "not hiking it for the accomplishment, but for what I will become because of the accomplishment."

He said he is at a crossroads in his life now, and doesn't know which way to go. "The solitude will make me look deep into myself and say 'this is where you are and this where you have to go.' I hope to gain strength of character," said Alan.

There is also spiritual value to the trip. The solitude makes him feel "close to God," he said.

He has extensive hiking experience under his belt, which should help him along the way. Besides the trip two years ago, he has climbed the highest peak in each of the six New England states, and Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks.

Alan was the first scout from Troop 16 to reach the rank of Eagle Scout, attaining that honor in 1978.

He said it was through scouting that he first thought of hiking the whole distance.

When he was 11 years old and hiking in Vermont he asked his scoutmaster what trail they were on and how long it was. He was told it was the Appalachian Trail and it ran from Georgia to Maine.

"I'm going to hike the whole thing some day," Alan remembers saying.

He plans to average 20 miles a day, sometimes more. "That's a strain on the body, especially with a 50 pound pack on the back," he said. He has been running five or six miles a day to prepare his legs for the ordeal.

Last time, he lost 35 pounds along the way. He plans to prevent that this time by eating better and resting more, he said.

Even so, the hardest thing to deal with is the mental problem rather than the physical one, he said.

He mentioned having to leave behind a warm bed, friends, balanced meals and his girlfriend.

When he gets to New England later this summer and nears the end of his trip, he will be joined by friends on the trail. His former scoutmaster, Lucien Leblanc, will meet him in New Hampshire and travel about 150 miles

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with him. And, in Vermont, he will be joined by his father, George, for a while.

"That should be one of the highlights of the trip," said Alan, talking of the time to be spent with his father.

The trip will be about about 75 percent personally financed, he said. The rest is being provided by personal sponsors. Alan said he would like to thank everybody who has contributed to his trip.

Asked if he has ever thought of attempting to break the speed record for the trail— 65 days, two hours and 15 minutes, according to Alan— he said "No way! That destroys the whole purpose of the hike."

But he said someday he would like to traverse the Rockies by foot. That is a 3,000 mile journey that runs from Mexico to Canada, he said.

Toward the end of August Alan hopes to arrive at Mt. Katahdin in Maine, signaling the end of his journey.

But when he arrives there he doesn't expect a hero's welcome. Many people have made the trip, asserts Alan, including others from Greater Woonsocket.

What Alan wants is strength of character and a sense of direction in life. For him, that would make the trip worthwhile.