

# **Old AT Shelters in South Central PA**

## **By Jeff Buehler**

### **The Big Appalachian Trail Relocation**

The Appalachian Trail (AT) in south central Pennsylvania to the west and north of Harrisburg was initially built on Blue Mountain from 1926 to 1931 by the Blue Mountain Eagle Climbing Club (BMECC). Some of the AT in Dauphin County was laid out on the older Darlington Trail at the time.

After Earl Shaffer's history making thru hike of the entire AT in 1948, Shaffer had the idea of a long relocation of the AT in this area. The old trail route on Blue Mountain dead ended at the Susquehanna River and hikers had to detour down river to Harrisburg to cross there on bridges and then return back up river on the other side. Also, during World War 2 and after, the AT was off limits to hikers on the Ft Indiantown Gap military installation and they had to follow paved roads through that area. Shaffer's idea was to re-route the AT further north to cross the Susquehanna River at Clark's Ferry on a highway bridge there and follow mountain ridges north of Indiantown Gap. The AT south of the river was also substantially relocated.

Shaffer took his trail relocation idea to the then named Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) where he worked with ATC Chairman Murray Stevens to bring it to a reality. He helped to found the Susquehanna AT Club (SATC) so as to have the additional local manpower needed to build the new trail route. He and other early SATC volunteers, along with other AT maintaining club volunteers, built a 60 mile AT relocation in the mid 1950's between Center Point Knob on South Mountain north to Swatara Gap.

The new AT route north of the Cumberland Valley crossed Blue Mountain instead of following along that ridge crest on a portion of the older Darlington Trail. It then traversed Cove Mountain to the town of Duncannon and crossed the Juniata and Susquehanna rivers. Then it followed Peters, Stony, Sharp, and Second mountains northeastward to Swatara Gap, now a PA State Park, before reconnecting with Blue Mountain again.

### **The Old Shelters Built along the AT Relocation**

After this new AT relocation was officially opened in March, 1955, there were no overnight shelter accommodations for hikers north of the Cumberland Valley. Earl Shaffer began building AT shelters, with some help of club volunteers, at conveniently spaced locations for AT hikers to use. He built

four shelters, one of stone, and three made of small logs, on Blue, Cove, and Peters mountains. In addition, SATC volunteers built a shelter in Clark's Valley near PA Rt 325 in the late 1950's and another shelter was built on Peters Mountain in the 1970's by the Zeager Lumber Company. None of these old shelters remain along the AT. All have been dismantled over the years due to abuse or replacement by new shelters. Two are now displayed at the AT Museum in Pine Grove State Park.

## **Darlington Shelter**

Hiking north on the AT out of the Cumberland Valley, the first of these old shelters was the original stone Darlington Shelter located on Blue Mountain just off of dirt Deans Gap Rd. The shelter was a short distance down the road on the north side of the mountain near a spring. The relocated AT had followed Deans Gap Rd down that side of the mountain to Myers Gap. The shelter was so named as the nearby Darlington Trail ran along the top of Blue Mountain. That trail was named in honor of Bishop James Henry Darlington of Harrisburg, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Alpine Club, an early hiking club in PA.

The stone Darlington Shelter was built in 1955-1956 by Earl Shaffer with assistance from members of the SATC. It was a typical three-sided lean-to made of native stone from the surrounding area and had a dirt floor. The roof was corrugated metal that Earl used to get second hand for his shelters.



On Saturday, Oct 29, 1955, five volunteers including Earl, battled stormy weather to get equipment and materials to the location by way of Millers Gap and the

Darlington Trail. The next day's activities included digging a trench and setting stones for a foundation while chilly rain kept falling. In November, a couple more work trips resulted in raising the walls about one foot high. By the time cold weather forced a halt to the work, the walls were three feet high. Work resumed in the Spring of 1956 with Explorer Scouts from Carlisle planning to participate in March. On a SATC Darlington Trail work trip on

May 6, participants stopped for a look at the new shelter. Earl Shaffer just about had it finished.

The Darlington Shelter was Shaffer's first shelter building project along the big AT relocation he took the lead on scouting out and building. Early thru hiker Dorothy Laker was "happily surprised" to find the shelter in 1962 on her second thru hike attempt. The shelter had turned up at the perfect time and place for her after she had just walked for 17 miles on the AT through the Cumberland Valley from Center Knob on mostly roads. Volunteers on early SATC trail work trips on the Darlington Trail (West) would stop for a rest at the shelter and drink cool water from its spring.



Unfortunately, the shelter suffered abuse over the years from easy access. In December 1977, the Mountain Club of Maryland (MCM) had re-routed the AT from Deans Gap north to Cove Mountain to eliminate one and a half miles of road walking so the trail no longer went by the old shelter. A new Darlington Shelter

was built by MCM that year about a mile further to the east on the mountain on a side trail off of the new AT relocation. That shelter was built off site and then carried in pieces to the site and put together. It was used until 2004 and then replaced by a third Darlington Shelter in 2005 at the same location that is still in use.

The original stone Darlington Shelter remained along Deans Gap Rd but was no longer a part of the AT. Over the years the structure was engulfed by vegetation and at one point a large tree fell onto the roof and rotted away there. Trash and old chairs occupied the dirt floor inside the stone walls. In August 2012, volunteers from SATC and others, with permission from the PA Game Commission, disassembled the stone walls and helped transport the stones to Pine Grove State Park where they were stored for future reassembly and display outside of the AT Museum there. Long time SATC volunteer and past club president Karen Balaban managed the project with

Larry Knutson of Penn Trails spearheading the disassembly and transportation to the museum.

The old stone shelter was finally re-built in August of 2023 beside the AT Museum by a contracted mason and an official dedication was held on Aug 12 on the grounds with many in attendance. Future plans may include a roof and exhibits inside the shelter with a protected front panel.

If you missed the dedication ceremony at the AT Museum, watch this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu32TtPp2eU>

## **Thelma Marks Memorial Shelter**

The next trail shelter heading north on the AT was the Thelma Marks Memorial Shelter. It was built in 1960 by Earl Shaffer and members of SATC and MCM. The shelter was then, 4.3 trail miles north of PA Rt 850 on Cove Mountain on a 0.1 mile steep, blue-blazed side trail going down the south side of the mountain.

The shelter was an Adirondack style three-sided lean-to, typical of the many shelters that had already been built along the AT as recommended by the ATC in publications at the time. It was made of small chestnut logs that Shaffer found still standing near the site. MCM volunteers helped cut and bring in the logs on April 2, 1960.



A Labor Day work weekend on September 3-4 was scheduled in the SATC *Bushwack Bulletin* to start the construction and several SATC members helped out. By November, the shelter was essentially complete as stated by Shaffer in his President's Report in the Dec 1960-Jan 1961 *Bushwack*

*Bulletin*. The shelter was approximately 16×12 feet with space for about six and had a corrugated tin roof. The question of whether or not to install bunks had not yet been decided. Wire bunks using hardware cloth were installed in many AT shelters at the time. Eventually an elevated wood floor was added instead.

This shelter was named for Thelma Marks, a SATC charter member and first Club Secretary-Treasurer when the club formed in April 1954. She was one of the 17 hikers on the first club hike on Sunday, April 4, 1954 to Hawk Rock on the AT high above Duncannon. She was very active in the club helping to design and produce the early issues of the *Bushwack Bulletin* before moving to Washington, DC and joining the staff of *Appalachian Trailway News*. She passed away Feb 8, 1959, of a sudden illness.

In Sept 1990, the Thelma Marks Shelter was the scene of a grisly double homicide of southbound thru hikers Molly LaRue and Geoff Hood that rocked the long-distance hiking community. The senseless act was committed by a

drifter, Paul David Crews who was apprehended on the AT in Harpers Ferry a week later and eventually convicted of the killings. Ten years later, in Sept 2000, the MCM had completed building a new shelter at the site and named



it Cove Mountain Shelter. Volunteers dismantled the old shelter, sawing up the old logs and burning them, and the stone foundation scattered in the woods.

## Susquehanna Shelter

The Susquehanna Shelter was the first shelter hikers came to on the AT north of the Susquehanna River. It was built by Earl Shaffer and York Hiking Club (YHC) volunteers on Peters Mountain and completed in the Spring of 1959. The shelter was located 0.8 mile north of the US 22/322 crossing on the east side of



the Clark's Ferry Bridge crossing of the river. After a very steep climb on the AT up through a gully, hikers soon came to the shelter on a short, blue-blazed side trail off an old woods road the trail followed on a shelf of Peters Mountain. At the time the shelter was built, the AT route did not go up on the mountain ridge crest as it does now. The Trail followed woods roads on the north slope of the mountain and then finally climbed to the crest on a pipeline.

The Susquehanna Shelter was a small lean-to that slept four to five hikers. It was made of small logs, had a metal roof, and a dirt floor, Earl Shaffer's preferred shelter sleeping arrangement. He opposed board floors for he felt they invited pests and trash, discomfort, and picnickers and squatters. The shelter



was very similar in size and style to the Earl Shaffer Shelter that was later built by Earl further north on Peters Mountain.

By the early 1980's the AT had been relocated to the top of Peters Mountain, going further towards the end of the mountain before climbing to the ridge crest and following along it. Earl and YHC Trails Supervisor Ron Gray scouted out this relocation together. After the trail was relocated, the YHC built a new shelter named Clark's Ferry Shelter on the south side of the mountain in 1987. The old Susquehanna Shelter remained along a now longer blue-blazed side trail (Susquehanna Trail) that made loop hikes possible with the AT until it was finally demolished in the 1990's by a landowner after squatters were reported using the shelter.

## **Zeager Shelter**

This shelter was located 1.5 miles north of PA Rt 225 on Peters Mountain. It was built by the Zeager Lumber Company in the 1972-73 time period to help compensate after logging had been done on the mountain.



This was before the National Park Service (NPS) started to acquire land and easements to protect the AT within a designated corridor on the mountain in the early 1980's.

Unlike many AT shelters, this shelter had no water source, and it was not built by SATC members. It was a three-sided wooden lean-to design with a



dirt floor but had six elevated bunks for hikers to sleep on, two on each side and two in the rear, double-deck style. The shelter was made of dimensional lumber verses logs with vertical siding and had a rubber roof added in the early 1980's.

This shelter was on a short blue

blazed side trail and built close to a rock overlook with nice views to the south of the Susquehanna River gap and surrounding mountains. It was too close to the trailhead at Rt 225 and was abused and trashed by campers often. After the new Peters Mountain Shelter was finished in 1994, 1.5 miles further north on the AT, the SATC decided to demolish the Zeager Shelter in Oct 1994 and not maintain the side trail to the view. A similar view could be found at Table Rock only another half mile to the north.



## Earl Shaffer Shelter

The Earl Shaffer Shelter was another small lean-to that only slept a few hikers in tight quarters. It was built by Earl Shaffer with small logs, a metal roof, and had a dirt floor. Earl probably started constructing the shelter sometime in 1961 as in a Pennsylvania AT Hike Series schedule in the June-July 1961 issue of the *Bushwack Bulletin*, "Lean-to" was listed under points of interest for a future hike on Peters Mountain in that area. On an April 29, 1962 SATC hike on Peters Mountain led by long time member Ruth Bolla, the hikers found the shelter practically completed and quite comfortable.



This shelter was located on Peters Mountain three miles north of the PA Rt 225 AT crossing. It was the middle shelter of three located on the stretch of the AT on Peters Mountain between the Susquehanna River and PA Rt 325 at that time. It would have been the last shelter built by Shaffer between the Fall of 1955 and the Spring of 1962.

There are no write-ups in *SATC Bushwack Bulletins* about the shelter construction so Earl may have built this one by himself without much club involvement. Earl and fellow SATC member Hank Finerfrock had already found a suitable location for this shelter and a spring on a SATC AT work trip on April 26, 1959, and later a side trail to the spring was cut and blue blazed with a sign installed at the intersection with the AT. The passing of Thelma Marks in 1959 and the desire to build a memorial shelter for her may have delayed the building of the Shaffer Shelter since Earl worked on that shelter project too in 1960.



The water source for the Earl Shaffer Shelter was a spring located on the north side of the mountain down a very steep and rocky trail that started right in front of the shelter. It descended treacherously about 300 feet in elevation in only 0.2 miles with no steps. Hikers needing water used to joke that the spring was located in Canada. The present spring trail from the new shelter follows much of the same route albeit with many stone steps (about 300) to the same spring and the hikers, of course, still complain of the grueling hike down, and back up.

In November 1978, SATC Trail Master Craig Dunn led volunteers on work trips to renovate the Earl Shaffer Shelter which by that time had seen much increased usage from the popularity of hiking and backpacking in general. At this time, the shelter's original metal roof was covered with heavy duty rubber roofing, the log chinking re-done, and the infamous flooring installed. Craig says that "the dirt floor was probably level when Earl initially built the shelter, and it could accommodate four persons". He further states that "after many years of use some of the dirt floor probably eroded away and a rock outcrop emerged in the center of the shelter which reduced its capacity to 2 persons". Eventually Earl found out about the modifications and was displeased. He asked the Club to remove his name from the shelter. In 1983 the SATC board complied and hence forth the shelter was known as the Peters Mountain Shelter in all literature and publications.

By the early 1990's the Club was discussing a replacement shelter along with a privy. The little shelter was no longer adequate for the ever-increasing number of hikers. A new, much larger Peters Mountain Shelter was built nearby along with a badly needed privy in 1993-94. The SATC board decided to keep the original Shaffer Shelter too, with continued minimal maintenance performed.

In August 2008, 60 years after Earl Shaffer completed the first recorded thru hike of the entire AT, volunteers from SATC, other AT Clubs, the AT Museum Society, and interested individuals, carefully disassembled the old shelter and hand carried all the pieces three miles across the mountain to the AT parking at PA Rt 225 where it was then trucked away. The shelter pieces were stored until the AT Museum in Pine Grove State Park became a reality and the shelter became a center piece exhibit inside the museum where it still is today.

## Clark's Valley Shelter

The Clark's Valley Shelter was built by SATC volunteers in 1957-58 on the lower south slope of Peters Mountain in Clark's Valley near the PA Rt 325 highway crossing. Ralph Kinter, co-founder of SATC and first club president, led the effort to find a suitable location and build the shelter. He was Chairman of the Shelters Committee at the time.



After the big relocation of 1955 was finished, there was a long 27 mile stretch of the AT without a shelter between Peters Mountain and north to the Applebee Shelter on Blue Mountain. North of Clark's Valley the AT went through

Photo is of the Iron Mtn. Shelter, which was similar to the CV Shelter

St Anthony's Wilderness which was PA State Game Lands where shelters and camping were not allowed.

SATC decided to construct a shelter as close as possible to the entrance of St Anthony's Wilderness. At a business meeting on May 25, 1956, a motion by the Shelters Committee to permit the President to negotiate for a shelter site near Pa Rt 325 and authorize an expenditure of \$100.00 for construction of the shelter, was passed. Since the land where the shelter was chosen to be located was part of the private Victoria Farms, the owners were contacted to obtain permission to build it. They had no problem with the club building a trail shelter and even allowed the cutting of dead oak trees for use in the construction. It was decided to construct the three-sided shelter with concrete blocks. According to Ralph's "Trail Blazes" articles in the *Bushwack Bulletin* he edited for many years, the shelter was the first on the AT to use concrete blocks in the construction. The shelter was fairly roomy for the time measuring 16 ½' long by 10 ½' wide. It had six "wire" bunks inside made by

building the bunk frames from 2×4 lumber and then attaching ½ inch hardware cloth for hikers to sleep on. The used metal corrugated roofing for the shelter was acquired by Earl Shaffer who used similar metal roofing on the shelters he built and thus saved the Club some badly needed funds.

Construction on the shelter began May 4, 1957 when volunteers hauled the materials to the site to put in a foundation which was completed that same day. A week later about a third of the shelter walls were up. By June 1958, the metal roofing was carried to the shelter which was nearing completion.

The Clark's Valley Shelter was officially dedicated in March 1959 with the PA Dept. of Environmental Resources and the PA Game Commission (PGC) sending representatives. Some early AT thru hikers in the 1960's mention staying in the shelter in their day-to-day narratives published in the book, *Hiking the Appalachian Trail* by Rodale Press, Inc.

In July 1964 the shelter was given a complete paint job making it look new again and in the 1967-68 time period work was done on renovating the wire bunks, replacing broken concrete blocks in the front of the shelter, and rebuilding the fireplace. On a June 14, 1970, AT work trip, the shelter bunks were found to need repairs again. The wire bunks in many shelters along the AT in the past were high maintenance and hikers were not fond of them as when the hardware cloth wire wore out or detached, it ripped hikers sleeping bags.

The Clark's Valley Shelter was rather short lived as by 1971 the shelter was demolished. A picture taken by Ralph Kinter of the destruction of the shelter was passed around at the March 6, 1971 SATC Annual Banquet. Ralph and Elmer Bolla were to check on why the shelter was torn down. No doubt the shelter's proximity to the AT crossing of PA Rt 325 and easy access contributed to abuse and the shelter's demise.

Ralph notes in "Trail Blazes" articles in 1972 Bushwack Bulletins that the loss of the shelter is being felt as use of the Earl Shaffer Shelter is heavy and the PGC is complaining of camping abuses in game lands. By 1970, much of the AT route on Peters Mountain north of the Victoria Trail was now through state game lands including the Clark's Valley Shelter. No mention of who destroyed the shelter was found in Bushwack Bulletins, but it certainly was not done by the SATC. If anyone has or knows someone that may have pictures of the Clark's Valley Shelter, please contact me (Jeff Buehler) to include in future editions of the *Bushwack Bulletin* and the SATC website.

The Blue Mountain Eagle Climbing Club (BMECC) built a new shelter the next year, in 1972, at Rausch Gap, 11.2 miles further north on the AT on a 0.2-

mile side trail. They received permission from the PGC to build the shelter for the use of through hikers only as defined by commission. That shelter is still in use and was substantially rebuilt by BMECC in 2012. SATC volunteers gave some assistance. This shelter reduced the long gap between shelters somewhat but there was, and still is, an 18-mile-long gap in shelters between Peters Mountain Shelter and Rausch Gap Shelter due to PGC and Dehart Reservoir water shed restrictions on building shelters.

For this article, the author researched old SATC *Bushwack Bulletin* newsletters that were compiled and bounded by the years of publication by charter, and longtime SATC member, Jennie Riggio of Harrisburg. Also used were old AT guidebooks, maps, and AT books from the author's private collection. Pictures of the old shelters taken by the author.

Thanks to former SATC Trail Master Craig Dunn and YHC Trails Supervisor Ron Gray for their input and to former SATC President Katie Barker for storing the collection of old SATC *Bushwack Bulletins* for many years.