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The Mountain of Youth

At 90, Dale Sanders is on the path to a record-breaking hike — all 2,199 miles of the Appalachian Trail.

by Anna Traverse

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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

On the really good days, there's a specific euphoria generated by an hour or four on a hiking trail. The forest's dappled light takes on a holy quality. Steps cease to be arduous, and one's legs move without strain; the air is buoyant as water. The breeze whispers across your skin, rustles your collar, and you can feel the oxygen flowing to your lungs, to your blood cells: You are never more part of the earth, and the earth never more part of you. There are no more fast-moving cars or lightning-bolt emails; there are no more cars or emails. Just this, here: this earth, this moment. For a day — or for longer, maybe much longer, especially if you're Dale Sanders — everything makes sense.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN PULFER FOCHT

When he was 80 years old, in the summer of 2015, Dale Sanders — trail name: Greybeard — launched a yellow canoe named *Anna* into the headwaters of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca, Minnesota. Paddling alone, and traveling around 30 miles a day, three months later he reached the river's confluence with the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Venice, Louisiana. He was the oldest person ever to have completed the 2,340-mile journey, from source to sea, although his record wouldn't stand for long.

Two years later, at 82, Sanders hiked the entirety of the Appalachian Trail (AT) — all 2,199 miles of various terrain, stretching across the crests and through the vales of the Appalachian Mountains from Springer Mountain in

Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine. Certified by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, he was the oldest person to have completed the trek — though that record would fall soon, too.

At 85, Sanders became the oldest person to hike the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim trail — a strenuous journey involving steep descents and arduous climbs.

At 87 — his Mississippi River age record having been broken — Sanders, not one to stop moving, again paddled the length of the Mighty Mississippi, reclaiming the record for himself.

Since Sanders' first AT hike, a fellow journeyer, Meredith Eberhart — better known by his trail name, Nimblewill Nomad — claimed the age record, at 83. Sanders helped him do it, supporting him along the trail just as, this fall, Nimblewill is supporting Greybeard.

This fall, Greybeard is spending his days traversing the peaks and ridges of the AT once again. He's 90 years old now, though you wouldn't know it to watch his movements, deft and spritely. "God willing and the creeks don't rise again," as he is fond of saying, he will retake the world record for being the oldest person to complete the Appalachian Trail within a year.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

Sanders' Chevy Silverado, driven by other team members, offers a cozy place for sleeping and for storing extra gear.

The day before he drives to the trailhead at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia — more on his chosen route shortly —

I sit with Greybeard on the porch of the home in Bartlett where he lives with his wife, Meriam. (The couple share three grown children and two grandchildren.) Deer amble through the open yard as we speak, and the bright, hot day dissolves the ice cubes in two water goblets. Sanders snacks from a bowl of pistachios — he credits strong nutrition as a key factor to his active longevity.

By now, his 20-year-old, silver-painted Chevy Silverado is mostly packed. The truck bed is specially fitted with a camper — Sanders' "Base Camp on Wheels" — that offers neatly organized storage for the gear he'll need, as well as, crucially, a small but cozy bed for sleeping. Team members will drive the truck along the way, so that, most nights, Sanders will be able to rest comfortably — and so that he won't have to carry a crushingly heavy pack into the backwoods. In some places, based on the route, there won't be a location where he can meet the truck for a day or two, and he will need to provision accordingly.

> He doesn't pretend to know exactly where he might find himself on any given day, along the way, but his intention is to reach Springer Mountain by December 10th. To do this, he'll need to average between 12 and 14 miles daily.

The plan is to complete the hike in a manner known as the "flip-flop": Instead of beginning at either the southernmost or northernmost point on the AT, Sanders has opted to begin roughly in the middle, at Harper's Ferry. (To count as a complete hike of the AT, one's GPS device must show each mile logged within 365 days — but the route does not need to be continuous.) This fall, he's hiking south, he says, "to follow the color of the trees, and hopefully a little warm weather, to Springer Mountain."

He doesn't pretend to know exactly where he might find himself on any given day, along the way, but his intention is to reach Springer Mountain by December 10th. To do this, he'll need to average between 12 and 14 miles daily, with some "zero days" mixed in — a zero day being a rest day, i.e., one with zero miles logged. In the spring, he will start walking again at Mount Katahdin, in Maine, and hike south until he arrives back at Harper's Ferry — ending at the beginning. He will have skipped a mile — the only one he plans to skip the entire hike — at Harper's Ferry, and he'll hike it at the end, as a celebration, with family, friends, media, everybody.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

First proposed in 1921 and completed in 1937, the 2,199-mile Appalachian Trail is considered the world's longest hiking- only trail. Stretching from Springer Mountainin Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine,it passes through 14 states. Hikers enjoy an astonishing range of views and trails, journeying through dense

old-growth forests or standing atop rocky peaks that offer views for miles. At 6,643 feet, Clingmans Dome in the Smoky Mountains is the highest elevation. A "through-hiker" like Sanders must complete the AT in a 365-day period, though it can be done in segments, tracking progress by GPS.

According to the CDC, the average American man lives 78.4 years. Sanders turned 90 in June.

Only 20-25 percent of through-hikers manage to complete the Appalachian Trail. Sanders has done it once already and is well on his way to a second successful attempt.

So what well of vitality has this man tapped?

Longevity science suggests that many of the choices that come naturally to Sanders have benefited his life span and activity span. He's been physically energetic for all his life — and moderate, regular exercise has been shown substantially to lower the incidence of multiple mortality risks, most especially cardiovascular disease. According to the American Medical Association, a 30-year study showed how increased physical activity led to prolonged life expectancies. One of Greybeard's mottos: *Keep moving*.

Meanwhile, an 80-year-long study, conducted at Harvard and funded by the National Institutes of Health, found how solid, grounding relationships can enhance longevity. "Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives," reports the *Harvard Gazette*. "Those ties protect people from life's discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes."

And Greybeard? Well, this is someone who aided another hiker in breaking his own record — and that hiker is now, in turn, aiding him. He cares for people. In fact, the basement level of his and Meriam's home is designed to care for fellow adventurers: When folks are paddling the Mississippi, they have an open invitation to crash in a

comfortable place for a night. The walls leading down to the basement are crowded with signatures from weary river voyagers. For someone who engages in solitary-seeming activities, the man is surrounded by community. The hike he's undertaking right now would not be possible without the devotion of people surrounding him.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

The best way to train for a very, very long hike, Sanders says, is simply … hiking. He doesn't prepare through some elaborate cross-training regimen; there's an appealing simplicity to his approach: *Just keep moving*.

Starting in January, he trained for the AT hike by scrambling up the hills and dales of Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park, in Millington. Local outdoor enthusiasts know Shelby Forest for its surprisingly steep scrambles — Sanders can log a couple thousand feet of elevation change if he repeats the Woodland Trail twice in a day. Sometimes, he starts early, with a headlamp, because "there are so many armadillos in there. It's unbelievable. You won't see them in the daytime, though."

Closer to his home is International Harvester Park, which offers shorter trails but still some scrambling; he's been known to repeat a one-mile loop 10 times in a row.

Just keep moving.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

Sanders spent 57 years working in parks and recreation. He was a lifeguard, growing up, then joined the Navy at 21, and went to boot camp in San Diego, California. Because he was already an experienced lifeguard and first-aid instructor, he was assigned to work at the naval hospital in Oakland, where he was put in charge of the swimming pool, for use primarily by amputees and sailors with other handicaps. Later, he led the SCUBA program for the Navy at the base on Okinawa. When he eventually left the Navy, he continued working in parks and recreation — at one time, he led about one thousand employees. He spent a lifetime in nature, around rivers, lakes, and woods, places where people go to find their centers.

He says working in parks for all those years put him around people "in their leisure time, the time they're the happiest. I believe that molded my personality to be happy."

By the time he retired, in 2002, Sanders was already an avid canoer, mostly on weekends. All this started because, as he puts it, "I just wanted to paddle more." At first, he mostly stuck to the Ghost River section of the Wolf. But — for reasons that make sense if you spend even 15 minutes with Grey Beard — as his 80th birthday approached, he thought to himself, "I've got to do something that's more significant in the adventure world."

And so he has, and so he is.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DALE SANDERS

As our conversation approaches the end of its trail, I steer us onto a darker, thornier fork. I can't help but ask directly how this 90-year-old man is thinking about not just the physical challenges ahead, but psychic ones, too: the solitude, the awareness of his own mortality. Asking anyone about death feels spiky and awkward, fraught; asking a nonagenarian about death feels downright grotesque. But Greybeard takes it, well, in stride. "Getting old doesn't worry me," he says. "I have already lived a full and joyful life. If I die, I think I can accept that. Death doesn't worry me. Nobody can tell you the formula to live a happy life. You have to figure that out yourself."

Even beyond the considerable age factor, he's well aware that most people who start through-hikes on the AT do not finish. "I may not be able to make it," he says with a shrug. "I am a competitive person, but I also have tried to be someone who can just appreciate things for what they are. I think this is an amazing experience, no matter what."

*To follow Dale "Greybeard" Sanders' journey on the Appalachian Trail, readers can check in on Instagram (**@daleat2025hike**) or Facebook (**Grey Beard Team USA Appalachian Trail**). For more about his previous adventures, including a documentary film that was made about his trip down the Mississippi River, visit **greybeardadventurer.com.***

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