

OUR GOAL WAS MAHOOSUC NOTCH in the mountains of western Maine. At 2500 feet the Notch isn't high, even by Appalachian standards. And it's only a mile long. But it's a tough hike. You have to pick your way over, around, between, and even under thousands of boulders. It's more a scramble than a hike.

The five of us picked an early weekend in October for our 14-mile hike. Saturday afternoon we started at the Speck Pond trailhead and hiked four and a half miles to the top of Old Speck. We noticed low, black clouds moving in from New Hampshire's White Mountains. We hoped we'd have good enough weather for our weekend.

We hiked back down Old Speck about a mile and camped at a lean-to by Speck Pond—at 3500 feet, the highest lake in Maine. In summer, this campsite is crowded and has a full-time caretaker. But our only neighbors were two young backpackers, a couple of spruce grouse and a flock of Canada jays.

Sunday morning I woke up shivering. The wind was blowing snow across the bottoms of our mummy bags. Clouds passed slowly overhead. We got up and put on wool pants, sweaters, hats, and gloves. Breakfast was hot oatmeal and cocoa. We finally warmed up enough to take off some clothes about 20 minutes out of camp.

We headed south towards the Notch, hiking along the ridge of Mahoosuc Arm. The sub-freezing temperatures had glazed the trail with ice. The ice was difficult to see on such a cloudy day.

A mile from the Speck Pond lean-to we reached the 3700-foot peak of Mahoosuc Arm. Here we turned onto

As John Edwards and Stephen Fuller descend Mahoosuc Arm and approach Mahoosuc Notch, the trail begins its change into the labyrinth to come.

*Do I jump across? Climb down? Squeeze through?
Or crawl over? The trail demands complete attention.*

Toughest Mile on the Appalachian Trail

Story and Photo by Stephen Greene

the Appalachian Trail and headed toward the Notch. Wind-blown snow had collected in granite crevices and frost covered the chest-high conifers. This was the highest we would hike that day.

On the way down the trail we looked for a sheltered resting spot. We picked a ledge overlooking the mountains and valleys to the south. The wind followed us however. The day before I was comfortable in shorts and a T-shirt. Now I was chilly even with all the clothes I had on. Our stop was short, and we set out again after ten minutes.

Behind us, 4200-foot Old Speck was shrouded in clouds. The snow line was distinct and even. Below snow line was the dark-green color of conifers. The lower slopes were dotted with yellow and brown stands of hardwoods. These were the "specks" which gave Maine's third highest peak its name.

To the south the hardwoods—red, orange and gold—had almost driven out the conifers. As we entered these hardwood stands the change was dramatic. The leaves of the beeches and maples reflected the light underfoot and overhead, brightening the drab day.

By noon we had hiked a mile and a half and had dropped 1500 vertical feet from the top of Mahoosuc Arm. We were at the upper end of Mahoosuc Notch. Here the trail squeezes between two granite cliffs. They rise steeply for several hundred feet. At the top, spruces are silhouetted against the sky as they lean precariously over the chasm.

We did some precarious leaning of our own. The trail demands complete attention. Each of us climbed onto a shoulder-high boulder and made a decision: Do I lower myself to the ground, only to climb the next rock? Or do I leap the couple of yards between them? A narrow crack separating two mammoth boulders presented another

choice. Either remove your pack and squeeze through, or find another route above or around. Elsewhere the choice was to stoop down and creep through a damp tunnel or bypass it by scrambling over the top.

This terrain is hard on the knees and feet. Tender spots on toes and heels flare into blisters even on feet that have hiked all season without such problems.

When a trail that's normally six feet below your eyes thrusts up within six inches of your nose, you pay closer attention to it. In the Notch, the cliffs blocked distant views. The panoramas we enjoyed earlier were gone, replaced by more intimate views.

Only at such close range did the Notch reveal its treasures. Tiny groves of British soldier lichen stood on springy mats of reindeer moss. A few hardy mushrooms, their stems bowing under heavy caps, grew in the shade of a trailside grotto.

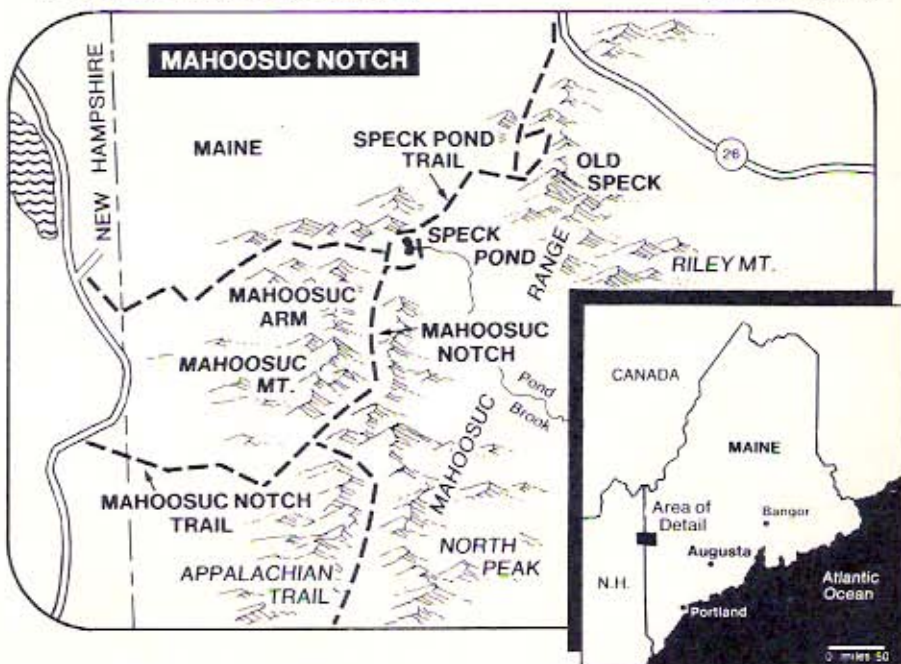
A lot of the trailside boulders were

covered with mats of green moss. Miniature trees and shrubs were growing in these mats. Most of the trees were twisted into bonsai forms and gave the area an exotic appearance.

The rock, too, shared its secrets. Fingers groping for a handhold noticed the coldness and texture of granite, the oily smoothness of map lichen; the dry roughness of rock tripe. Feet testing for footholds discovered how steep an angle and how stubby a projection would support one's weight and which rocks were likely to be slick with ice. Rock that appeared a drab gray from a distance showed crystalline flecks and veins of many colors.

But the fascinating action was at the frontier where tree met rock—the few millimeters of soil from which sprang islands of vegetation in a sea of granite. Hardwoods and conifers several feet tall clung to boulders. Their roots dangled toward the earth searching for nourishment and stability. A few were

Continued on page 62



THE STOWAWAY STOVES.

You can enjoy a hot meal anywhere you camp, with an Optimus stove. Choose from several compact, lightweight models—all easy to pack, simple and safe to use. Precision-engineered, high quality, and super reliable! Use long burning economical white gas. Optimus, Inc., 12423 E. Florence Av., Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670. Optimus... the easy way to rough it.

Optimus

See our display at your backpack supply store or specialty sports shop.



Toughest Mile

Continued from page 61

successful. They sat illogically, their roots draping over the rocks and plunging into the ground. Most weren't so lucky.

Mahoosuc Notch is one of the more spectacular of the AT's depressions—those convoluted infoldings where the hiker feels surrounded by stone. Although we were near the center of some of the most popular hikes in the Northeast, we felt closed in, isolated—almost intruders.

After an hour we were ravenous and dropped behind trailside boulders for our last meal of the trip. We propped our packs on waist-high ledges for protection from the wind. Lunch—bread, cheese, peanut butter, and gorp—was over quickly. We shouldered our packs and swung off down the trail.

The topo map showed streams running in both directions from the Notch divide. But in October, they're usually dry. Except for a few moss-lined pools, we didn't see any water. In the spring these streams run swollen as the winter's ice and snow melt from the Notch's cool and shady recesses.

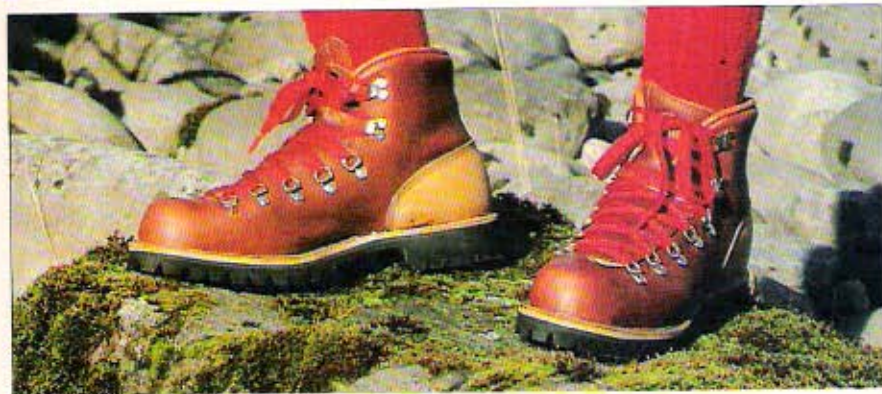
Halfway through the Notch we passed other hikers, all heading the way we came. Some traveled light, scrambling over the rocks in sweat-shirts and sneakers. Others wore sturdy boots and carried small day packs. We had sympathy rather than encouragement for two backpackers determined to pass through the Notch, climb the steep trail to Mahoosuc Arm and reach the Speck Pond lean-to by dusk.

Their work was just beginning. For us, it was almost over. The Notch was ending as suddenly as it began. The trail led through a stand of firs and passed again into hardwood forest. Only an occasional behemoth, set squarely in the path, reminded us of what we had just been through.

We had hiked for five hours since leaving the shelter. And we traveled less than three and a half miles. We spent half that time in the Notch. Allowing for lunch and rest stops, that's an average of less than half a mile an hour through the Notch.

We almost jogged the next two and three quarter miles to the end of the trail. It seemed so easy after the Notch. We passed through a hardwood forest where a kaleidoscope of fallen leaves glowed up at us.

But our trip was over and we knew it. It was well worth the blisters, sore feet and exhaustion that follows any hard hike. Though I was sore and tired, I was ready to return for another try at the toughest mile. ■



Feel the Danner difference

At Danner, we make hiking boots for both men and women that feel good, look good and do good things for your feet. We take the time to put the finest quality and workmanship into every boot we make.

Take, for instance, our Pacific Crest boots. Comfortable, yet sturdy, these boots are made especially for longer distances. An extra leather middlesole helps protect your foot from shocks caused by the weight of a heavy pack.

Try on a pair of Danner Pacific Crest boots today and feel the Danner difference.



Danner Shoe Mfg. Co., P.O. Box 22204, Portland, OR 97222