Trail Mix
A Little Maine Romance

A man, a woman, and a black lab find love and one another on the Appalachian Trail.

BY MELANIE BROOKS
When my sister, Jennifer Brooks, left Bangor in April 2002, she carried everything she’d need for the next seven months in a salsa-red backpack. With her friend Dave Kilgour at her side, she hopped a Greyhound bus for a three-day ride south to Gainesville, Georgia—the beginning of the Appalachian Trail.

Jenn and Dave set off on this adventure together, sharing their tent and cooking equipment. Although they were good friends, they were not good hiking partners.

“I got frustrated with Dave because our hiking styles were different. He’s a mile counter and a much more experienced hiker,” Jenn says. “I’m more of the philosophy of when I’m tired I want to stop.”

And she had to stop a lot at first. Out of shape and in boots that weren’t properly broken in, Jenn got what she refers to as meat feet. “They had raw, open sores and were red–like ground beef,” she says. The slow pace didn’t suit Dave. He had an agenda. He wanted to be home in time for the fall semester.

A couple of weeks into their hike, Dave befriended a 25-year-old named John Sonnenberg from Middleport, New York. The two guys started hiking together in northern Georgia, leaving Jenn behind to walk alone.

“John and Dave became friends, and they’d just leave me,” she remembers. She was not a happy camper.

Despite her frustration, Jenn decided to extend an olive branch to John. Her journal reads, “I brought a couple of Heinekens to John to try and bribe some friendship and conversation. It worked.”

Twenty days into their hike, Jenn and Dave decided to split up. “I told Dave in
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Gatlinburg, Tennessee, that I didn’t want to hike with him anymore. I called Mom and Dad and told them to send a tent to Hot Springs, North Carolina, my next stop,” she says. Dave set off alone.

But Jenn wasn’t totally by herself. Frequently she ran into John, and they’d hike together for the day. Jenn looked forward to their conversations, and they eventually became good friends.

“Because Dave hiked so far ahead of me, I never had anyone to talk to. John hiked with me,” Jenn says.

When Jenn and John reached Damascus, Virginia, they took three days off from hiking to relax and get to know each other. “That’s where we felt the romantic connection,” Jenn says with a smile. “We went and did laundry, drank some beer, and had our first kiss.” One week after leaving Damascus, they decided to split their equipment between them, sending home Jenn’s stove and John’s tent.

“We have a very similar sense of humor, and he doesn’t talk just to hear himself talk,” Jenn says of John. “And I liked him because he challenged me.”

He was also thoughtful. He’d get to a stream first and build Jenn a small bridge out of rocks. He’d save the pink M&Ms from his bag because he knew Jenn liked them. He’d pick daisies for her and make a bouquet. “Plus, he’s cute,” Jenn adds.

Adorable as John was, it was Jenn’s idea to add to their hiking family.

“It’s been my life’s mission to get a dog. It’s the only thing I ever wanted for Christmas,” Jenn says. The two had met other hikers who had black/blank mixes on the trail—the kind of dog they wanted. They decided to check out the SPCA in Charlottesville, Virginia, while staying the night with family friends.

The shelter was overcrowded, and Marley was in a kennel with a puppy. While the pup bounced around all over the place, Marley stayed calm and cool.

“It was a kill shelter. His number was up,” Jenn says. When Jenn and John took Marley outside to play, his energy and happiness melted their hearts. “I think you just know it’s a good fit with a dog,” Jenn says.

The trio proved to be a good fit all around, and Marley was up to the challenge of the hike. Despite his swollen paws, he carried his own backpack and snuggled between Jenn and John in the tent at night. “He’s such a good dog,” Jenn says.
The few times Marley wasn’t on a leash he walked in between his parents. With John as the engine and Jenn as the co-pilot, Marley assumed the position of cargo. They started to refer to themselves as “The Slow Train to Maine.”

There were areas of the Appalachian Trail where Marley was not welcome or the trail was too rough. One of those places was Mahoosuc Notch in Maine. “It’s a mile stretch of nothing but rocks,” Jenn says. “Hikers call it ‘The Longest Mile.”

Another one of those places was Baxter State Park. During these times, Jennifer’s parents, Brian and Mary Ellen Brooks, came to pick up Marley and took him back to their home in Orono.

Marley was the first of the trio to find a home in Orono. Although Jenn doesn’t recall the exact day John rolled over in their tent and told her he loved her, they fell in love on the trail.

“I think we both wanted to say it, but neither of us wanted to say it first. I’d never told someone I loved them before. As soon as he told me I said it right back. It was a relief!” Jenn says.

Today the couple has been married for almost two years. They recently finished building their house in Orono and had their first child in May. Jenn is a buyer for Epic Sports, and John is an aircraft mechanic with the Bangor Air National Guard. Every so often they’ll ask each other, “Where would we be right now if we were on the trail?”

“We’re willing to bet the answer is somewhere together.”

John, Jenn, Marley, and baby-on-the-way. Daughter Ayda was born in May.