

For Immediate Release

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Spring commencement

YSU graduate explores culture of Appalachian Trail

“Yes, it is my birthday today. I have waited and planed [sic] for 5 years to be here today. Peace, Love, Joy and Harrmony [sic] to all.”

- Grandmother Bear, 7/7/03, Rocky Run Shelter, Virginia.

Andrea Thompson of Warren was on a five-day, 80-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail in Vermont a year ago when she first came across messages like this in logbooks along remote sections of the trail.

As a communications major at Youngstown State University, Thompson recognized the entries as part of a unique communication culture, so she launched a study of the logbooks as part of a research project funded by a \$500 undergraduate research grant from YSU.

“Each register has its own personality,” Thompson said. “Literally hundreds of hikers write in the books – everything from a sentence or small sketch to pages and pages.”

Thompson receives a bachelor’s degree in communications at YSU’s spring commencement on Saturday, May 21. Due to the growing number of graduates, commencement will be split into two ceremonies: 9:30 a.m. in Beeghly Center for undergraduate students, and 2 p.m. in Stambaugh Auditorium for graduate students. In all, nearly 1,200 students will receive diplomas.

The Appalachian Trail is a 2,160-mile footpath from Maine to Georgia that passes through 14 states, eight national forests, two national parks and crosses 15 major rivers. The trail is dotted with 256 small shelters, where hikers unroll their sleeping bags for a

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night's rest. Each shelter contains a logbook, which vary in shape and size from small memo pads to larger notebooks.

The logbooks' primary purpose is safety: if someone needs help or is missing, the entries help park rangers trace a person's steps.

But Thompson said the books are much more: they record a culture and language of the trail travelers. People take on trail names such as Grandmother Bear, Spiderman and Truckin,' and tell stories in the logbooks.

"Hiking can be a very spiritual thing," Thompson said. "You really get a bond with the other hikers."

Thompson has collected and studied 16 logbooks, mostly from areas of Virginia and Pennsylvania. In addition to her trip last summer to Vermont, Thompson visited the trail in the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia over spring break this year.

"I identified themes in the logs and tried to analyze the hikers' motivations for writing in the logs," she said. "Usually the narrative paradigm is only applied to a single narrator. Instead, I am interpreting themes consistent throughout the logs. This way, I can focus on how the context of the trail affects the communication."

The research is broad in scope, said Thompson's faculty advisor, Larry Hugenberg, YSU professor of communication and theater.

"This involves hundreds of people," he said, "and it will be an interesting prospect to find themes."

Thompson, whose goal is to pursue a doctoral degree in communications, said she has learned a lot about the trail experience from the logbooks.

For instance, at Pine Grove Furnace in Pennsylvania – the symbolic halfway point of the trail – hikers feast on a half gallon of ice cream at the Pine Grove Furnace General Store. An entry from the Pine Grove Furnace logbook reads, "6/19 I ate a pint; they said I could keep my plastic spoon. Does anyone know where I can get a plastic spoon engraved?...–Doc"

When hiking near Killington, Vt., Thompson came across a stream with unopened cans of soda pop floating in it. Near the stream was a small "mail box" nailed to a tree that contained a logbook. People left messages about how grateful they were for a cold drink after climbing the hills.

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One of Thompson's favorite entries is in a logbook in Little Gap in Pennsylvania: "Sierra, Luke and Daddy. 3 ½, 6 ½, & 38 years old. Never too young to experience life and nature."

Thompson hikes the trail with her fiancé, Mike Veri, also a YSU student who graduates in the fall. The two will return to Shenandoah National Park on Sept. 25 to be married at the top of a mountain.

She said that being out in remote wilderness is new for her. "I'd never even camped out in my backyard," she said.

But now, she's hooked.

"The reward for getting to the top of the mountain is so amazing," she said. "You forget how much your feet hurt, and that you've been eating granola bars for three days."

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Photo caption

YSU senior Andrea Thompson hikes along a section of the Appalachian Trail in Vermont, about 10 miles from the New Hampshire border. "After walking 80 miles with rain soaked socks, my feet were killing me, but it was absolutely worth the blisters," Thompson said.