

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB MARKS 75 YEARS IN CONNECTICUT

JAMES ENDRST; Courant Staff Writer THE HARTFORD COURANT

When the Connecticut Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club was born 75 years ago, 40 people gathered at Hubbard Park, hiked to the top of West Peak, killed a rattlesnake on the way up and got rained on.

On Saturday, about 100 members of the AMC Connecticut Chapter met here again -- this time on a warm, radiant afternoon -- to celebrate the chapter's 75th anniversary.

No rattlers were reported.

Dave Cullen, president of the Connecticut chapter, led the day's premiere activity throughout the modest but vigorous 2.5-mile hike through dappled sunlight to West Rock and then Castle Craig Tower for remembrances and some stunning, expansive vistas from the Hanging Hills.

Gardner Moulton, a 70-year-old, [Hartford](#)-born retired banker and Rip Van Winkle lookalike, who joined the club in 1951, was among the hikers, featured speakers and former leaders of the group.

"I think the state of Connecticut has a variety of beauty unmatched by any other state," Moulton said on the march to the top. "The traprock ridges are

very special. They're unique. . . . No, they don't match the West's grandeur, but there's a special flavor to them that I just love.

"One of the great strengths of the AMC in my estimation is its willingness and eagerness in accepting people of all levels of ability and enthusiasm," he said.

It wasn't always that way.

It wasn't too long ago that new members needed sponsors to get in. Now, as was obvious at Saturday's event, the group includes a variety of ages and professions, from young adults to senior citizens.

The Connecticut chapter of AMC has about 8,700 members, said Cullen, while the Northeast-based group as a whole has about 70,000. When Cullen joined 10 years ago, the state membership totaled about 3,000. The increase in membership, he says, can be attributed in part to a more liberal come-one-come-all policy, which welcomes a variety of outdoor enthusiasts.

"Anybody who's got the 40 bucks [for membership] can join," said Cullen. "In the early days you had to have two nominations, but they did away with that in the early '80s. And I think it's made a big difference in the club. Some of the old-timers don't like it."

Saturday's hike-and-bike (cyclists, who pedaled 25 miles, met walkers at Castle Craig) didn't actually fall on the official anniversary date of June 11, 1921, for a variety of practical and organizational reasons.

But the decision turned out to be fortuitous when it came to the weather.

According to a participant quoted in the John Scully and Marjorie Hackbarth compilation "A Brief History of the Connecticut Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club," the ground-breaking 1921 hike was joyful but soggy.

"Our baptism was almost immediate," the walker recalled. "The clouds had been darkening and the thunder began to roll . . . no sooner had we started down the trail than the heavens opened. Never, it seemed to us, had it rained harder . . . "

Saturday, there was only sun and celebration and clear shots at distant landscapes, from Sleeping Giant State Park, New Haven and Long Island Sound to the Berkshires of southern Massachusetts.

It was a casual atmosphere as Robert Squire of Meriden remembered the stories his father and mother, Connecticut AMC charter members, told him about the group, pointing to their faded picture in the chapter's September newsletter. Gerry and Sue Hardy, authors of "Fifty Hikes in Connecticut," stopped by for the informal ceremonies, and expended enthusiasts sated themselves with lemonade and snacks.

"Before it was sort of elitist," said 79-year-old Hackbarth. "And now it's open to anybody who wants to join, which I suppose is a good thing."