

Tim Bennett

KITCHEN TABLE

Conversations

This essay is an excerpt from a memoir, *One Mountain After Another*, by Tim "Porkie" Bennett, End-to-End Class of 2023. It is slated to be published in late 2026.

The table inside Birch Glen Camp was old and weathered, but solid, and clad in a layer of pitted brown sheet metal. Relief carvings of a maple leaf and the outline of Vermont adorned one of the heavy benches, adding to the historic charm. Embracing the vintage vibe, I sat down to gather my thoughts.

Out of curiosity, I pulled the shelter logbook out of its plastic bag and flipped to the first page, where someone had written in large block letters:

Dear Hikers:
Welcome to Birch Glen Camp!
I hope you're not weary or damp
But if that's the case
Rest well in this place
Before you continue your tramp.

A perfect welcome message for a shelter built in the 1930s. The word "tramp" evoked the trail's early history and GMC publications, which often featured lighthearted trail humor. I didn't have anything profound to add, so I just signed my trail name and closed the logbook to write in my journal instead.

Since returning to the Long Trail in 2023 after a car accident cut my 2022 hike short, my writing had been messy, disjointed, and incomplete. I wanted to record daily observations, but it often felt like a chore after arriving at camp late and exhausted. Most nights, I struggled to stay awake long enough to scribble a few words by headlamp after settling into my sleeping bag. Even at the motel in Waitsfield last night, I dozed off, waking to find my journal open on the bed, the pen between the pages, and a half-finished entry.

Hoping to fill in the gaps, I spent a few minutes at the table comparing my father's observations with mine. He hiked the Long Trail from Sherburne Pass to Bolton back in 1937, and I discovered his trail journal a few months before I began my own thru-hike. It wasn't clear whether he slept at Birch Glen on his 1937 hike. His notes only stated that it was "a nice camp near the top of the Stark Mountains." The mileage didn't line up, but Birch Glen felt right.

The rustic table brought me back to my youth, when Pop and I sat at our kitchen table, talking about camping, fishing, and hiking. My mother worked evenings back then, so it was our opportunity to spend time together bonding as father and son.

Memories began to appear in flashes: maps of the Allagash in Maine, the sound of a knife blade being drawn across a whetstone, the smell of the honing oil, a dog-eared Herter's Hunting and Fishing Catalog, the flickering of an 8mm projector screening home movies on the reflective refrigerator door; he and I discussing grand adventures.

I could almost hear his voice, pontificating with complete confidence about the best way to rub neatsfoot oil into leather boots, how to build a cooking fire in the rain, or John Muir's recipe for insect repellent using pine tar and oil of pennyroyal.

Damn, I missed him. Sitting at the shelter table, I had many questions: What inspired him to take this hike? Did he have a mountain-top epiphany? A mantra for tough times? Had he hiked other sections of the LT? Did he enjoy his journey in the moment, or only afterward, when looking back on it?

But no matter how many times I looked at his journal, I wasn't going to find the answers there. I regretted not asking more while he was alive, and now I could only hope that following his path might provide the clarity I desperately sought. After writing for a while and reviewing maps and trail notes, it was time to decide. Continue hiking as planned or stay? Another question with no answer in the pages of his journal.

I chose to stay, ignoring my inner drive to push for more miles. The connection with my father felt strong at Birch Glen, especially at the table. I found myself thinking less about my hike and more about his.

From the beginning, my goal for this trek was to compare our journeys. But the daily challenges made that difficult. Too often, I compared myself to the hiker I was before the accident, rather than to my father.

But slowly, organically, I began to feel a genuine connection. I sensed the slightest hint of it on the summit of Mt. Abraham. Then it grew stronger during our "conversation" at the table in Birch Glen. By the time I reached Burnt Rock, it truly felt like I was tramping the same path he had, step-for-step.

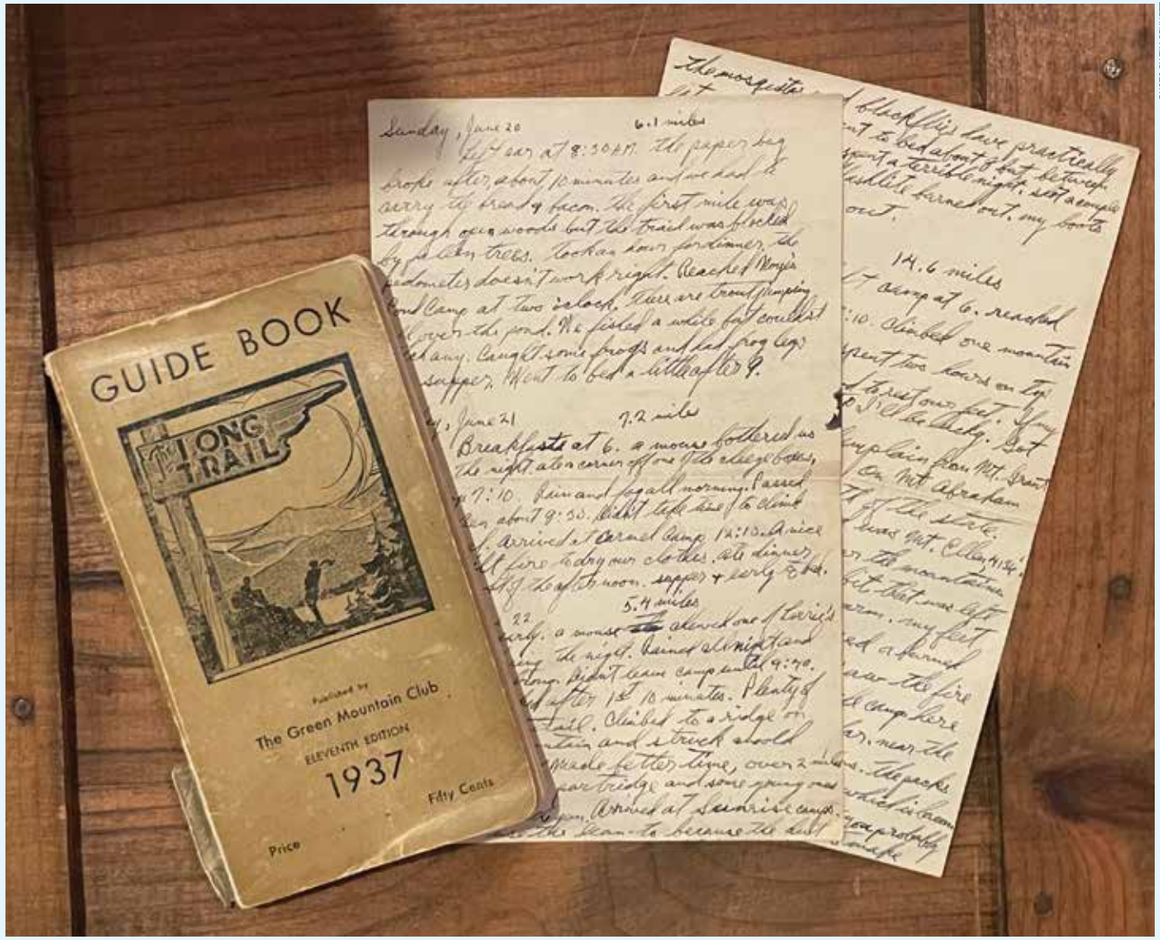


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Tim Bennett used his father's Long Trail journal and a 1937 *Long Trail Guide* to deepen his experience on his own Long Trail thru-hike.