



# How I Got This Way - WFA

*Ann Gerckens, Long Time COP Trip Leader*

A fellow backpacking leader commented the other day that her hiking buddies don't understand why she is interested in taking classes like Wilderness

First Aid and Wilderness First Responder. After listening to me moan for a few minutes about this new culture of "We don't need to learn anything, we saw a 5 minute video on YouTube", she responded that they probably had been lucky and never needed first aid skills.

So let me tell you how I became interested in Wilderness First Aid. I did see the 1985 Backpacker Magazine article on the new Wilderness Medicine Classes that SOLO was pioneering up in New Hampshire, but I filed the information away in the back of my mind.

In 1988, I closed my housecleaning business and went for a long hike on the Appalachian Trail. I sometimes refer to this as my tour of Appalachian Hospitals. Over the course of three months, I found myself in need of medical help not one, but three times.

The first was in Virginia. I managed to cut my lower leg crossing a barbed wire fence. Bleeding freely, I did not stop to wash it out, but continued on another mile to a road crossing with a restaurant. Taking advantage of the facilities, I cleaned the cut. It didn't look bad and I thought nothing of it for the next 4 days. On day 5, I woke to red, puffy edges. Twice a day I applied a warm, wet cloth and applied neosporin. Day 7, the red took on a purplish tinge & started to spread up my leg. A rest day seemed in order. By day 9, the purple covered a solid 2 inches from the cut. Not feeling very well, I decided that I would find a doctor when I reached Pearisburg. I didn't get that far on foot. Day 10, I was having breakfast at Woodshole Hostel when Tilly noticed how little I had eaten. Mentioning I wasn't feeling well resulted in a thermometer in my mouth. And that resulted in my arriving at the Pearisburg Hospital by car. A shot, Rx for antibiotics and instructions to take several weeks of rest later, I was on the bus home. **Lesson: In the backcountry, take every wound seriously.**

But hey! I've quit my job and cleared my schedule for a hike. It was only a week before I was back in Virginia with my car,

working out slackpacks with other hikers so I could continue up the trail by day hiking. After three weeks of this, I drove back home and left the car, returning to the trail ready to backpack.

Having lost too much time to make it to Maine before winter, I picked up the trail in northern Pennsylvania. I figured I could cover the gap on weekend hikes from Columbus.

My second medical adventure happened in New York. I assume that I slipped and fell but for all I know, a space ship might have landed, kidnapped me and thrown me back to the ground. One minute I was walking along a ridge, gauging my pace - could I keep it up? Could I reach the next spring before dark? Next thing, I'm on the ground with no idea of where I am, what happened and what is that thing in front of me. The thing turned out to be my arm. I was fortunate to be hiking with a friend, *and* fortunate that the friend was behind me at that point because we had no formal system for meeting up/keeping track of each other. If he had been ahead of me, I probably would have still been in the same spot on the ground the next day.

**Lesson: have a plan for when/where to meetup, what to do if/when the other person doesn't show.**

Unfortunately, he had less first aid training than I. All he knew to do for swelling was to put ice on it. He was quite upset and I eventually sent him on a mission to a nearby lake community to find some ice. I needed some peace to think of what needed to be done and how. At my direction, he covered me with my wool sweater, down sleeping bag and put my hat on before leaving. **Lesson: Know what skills your companions have, encourage them to have more.**

So. There I am, lying on the ground, cold beneath my layers on a 97 degree day. In the time it took for my friend to cover 1/4 mile of steep trail with ladders and back, knock on a door and get ice, three thru-hikers passed me. The first mentioned seeing my buddy and said she was a nurse and we should not bother trying to splint my arm for the hike out. It wasn't very far to the road. The next hiker took a moment to criticize my choice to take a rest smack dab on the trail before hurrying on toward Maine. The third didn't hesitate, but told me to walk it off. **Lesson: You can't depend on a stranger helping you, or even sitting with you until help arrives.**

When my friend returned with a glass jar of ice, I told him it was time to find a doctor. I sent him on to the road with instructions

to hide his pack and come back for me. Returning, he put on my pack, and helped me up. I was pretty unsteady and he had to spot me the whole way.

We were fortunate that the first car to come along stopped. Even more fortunate that recognizing that we needed a hospital, he did a U turn to go back from where he'd come. **Lesson: know where the area hospitals are.**

The intake process was difficult. I was pretty loopy. Among other things, when they asked me for information about my nearest kin or friend, I pointed to my buddy. They meant someone who could sign me in because I was *not* competent, but I didn't understand. I mean, he's right there in front of them! Everyone else is back in Ohio. **Lesson: Do you and your buddies have emergency contact information for each other?**

The verdict at the hospital was that no bones were broken, but I'd lost a lot of blood. **Lesson: Just because it isn't on the ground doesn't mean you aren't bleeding. Apply direct pressure!**

The hospital send me off with a prescription for ibuprofen and a sling. A nurse intercepted me and pointed out that I could do over the counter ibuprofen for a lot less money. She also sent me out a side door so I could leave with out paying onthe spot. I found out later that it never occurred to the doctor that I would be stupid enough to keep hiking.

Three weeks later, after a day off in Kent Connecticut. I woke sick in the wee hours. Losing it at both ends, I stayed several days at Bond Shelter. Looking back, I think that if there had been no privy, I might have sought medical help sooner. I knew I was passing blood, but had no idea just how much until I reached facilities with porcelain. **Lesson: if you are passing blood, you need a doctor!**

This was the beginning of the end for my hike. It took another 2 weeks or so for me to accept it, but I was out of money, running out of time, and still being weak, not enjoying myself.

At home again, I began looking into alternatives to the usual Basic First Aid. In 1992. I persuaded COP to offer Wilderness First Aid. Over the years, I've had plenty of occasion to use my skills. Fortunately, most of the use was on the assessment end, i.e. does this person need EMS, or can I sit him in the shade with a bottle of water and keep an eye on him?

**We have a Wilderness First Aid Class scheduled for March 5&6.**

**I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity.**