

June 6, 2008

## Mount Kisco man building 350-mile trail

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*The Journal News*

### **CORTLANDT**

Quixotic might describe Bob Jessen, 68, who is trying to fashion a 350-mile-long hiking trail hitching the Bronx to the Adirondacks.



But the Mount Kisco great-grandfather, retired marine-insurance underwriter and Air Force veteran doesn't compare himself to Don Quixote, the idealistic character in the Spanish novel. He looks elsewhere to see reflections of his and his sidekicks' effort at carving a trail from the urban, suburban and wild landscapes of New York.

"I'm like Rommel," he said, referring to the German field marshal of World War II known for his crafty campaigns. "I'm crossing the Hudson (river) somewhere. I'm connecting points."

Jessen, his girlfriend, Jeanine Meyer, and his sister, Elizabeth Baecher, began the campaign last February and will celebrate their first 75 miles tomorrow, in honor of National Trails Day. The threesome are mostly linking existing trails on public land, keeping hikers off the area's roads. They've been stymied, though, where their trail crosses from Westchester into Putnam County.

For Jessen, who worked on a similar undertaking almost five decades ago, creating the Hudson Trail blossomed after a search for self-purpose.

"The only things I've ever done in my life is it took me 35 years to become a chess master and I built a trail on the other side of the river. I'd get eaten alive if I played chess (again). I said, 'Oh, a hiking trail,' and I got out my maps," he explained.



As a 21-year-old, he helped blaze the Long Path, which was envisioned as a 400-mile-long byway from the George Washington Bridge, across the Palisades, through Rockland County and northward to Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks. Today, the Long Path ends south of Albany, about 80 miles short of its goal.

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, which began in the 1920s as a gathering of local hikers who wanted to build and maintain trails, oversees the Long Path. Executive director Edward Goodell said Jessen's project harks back to the conference's roots.

"It's enormously difficult to complete such a project in this day and age," Goodell said. "Things have changed so dramatically in terms of land use since even the 1960s. But you need visionaries like Mr. Jessen to crystallize a very clear, easily conceived type of idea."

The trail starts at Highbridge in the Bronx, part of the Old Croton Aqueduct, and follows the trailway along the unused aqueduct up through Westchester to the New Croton Reservoir. From there, Jessen relies heavily on the Briarcliff-Peekskill Trailway and the Blue Mountain Reservation, both county-owned parks.

"It's a meaningful way for us to link up with another group," Westchester Parks spokesman Peter Tartaglia said.

There's been some "hacking away at the woods," Jessen said, but blazing has mostly involved painting blue diamonds. The trail markers are placed on trees and utility poles.

"The last color you want to use in the woods is green. It stands to reason, " Jessen said one recent afternoon as he touched up a diamond on Watch Hill Road outside the Blue Mountain Sportsmen Center in Cortlandt.

The trail then works its way to near the Hudson Valley Hospital Center, eventually heads east on Route 6 and passes under the Bear Mountain Parkway. Nearby is where Jessen wanted to turn the trail north and run it for three miles along the Catskill Aqueduct, which carries drinking water from the mountains to Westchester and New York City.

"It was a natural, a slam dunk," he said of the aqueduct's cleared swath.

But its owner, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, said no. A DEP spokesman said security concerns precluded allowing hikers to traverse the buried aqueduct.

"While we did offer to review a proposal for a small crossing over the aqueduct with the installation of certain security barriers, we cannot allow such a large section of the aqueduct to be available for public use," said Michael Saucier of the DEP.

That forced the trail onto Locust Avenue and along Gallows Hill Road to Sprout Brook Road in Putnam Valley. Jessen then enlisted state Sen. Vincent Leibell, R-Patterson, who sent a letter to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg about using the aqueduct land. Leibell said yesterday that he would further pursue Jessen's request after the legislative session ends this month.

The route then winds through Clarence Fahnestock State Park and across other state land. Beacon in Dutchess County is considered the first leg's terminus. Jessen figures the entire trail, which will end at Mount Marcy, will take two more years to complete. Finding a way from point A to B and painting blue diamonds throughout the Lower Hudson Valley and beyond has a simple end for Jessen.

"We want to get people out hiking. It's a good, green thing and, hold the phone, it doesn't cost anything," he said.

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