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Andy Niekamp's Fountain of Youth

By Tom Archdeacon, August 10, 2010
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End of another Appalachian Trail hike: Andy Niekamp on the summit of Mount Katahdin 10 days ago

Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon couldn't find it, nor could Greek king Alexander the Great.

The great Arawak Indian chief, Sequene, sailed out of Cuba to find it, but was never heard from again.

Captain Jack Sparrow — Johnny Depp’s deliciously eccentric character in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies — will search for it in a movie to be released next year.

And David Cooperfield claims to have found it on one of the Bahamian islands he bought. But, of course, he’s a magician of grand deception — a guy who tries to make you believe he made the Statue of Liberty disappear, levitated over the Grand Canyon and walked through the Great Wall of China — so you know his whole deal is an illusion.

And then there’s Kettering’s Andy Niekamp.

The 49-year-old adventurer says he’s found “my personal Fountain of Youth” and when you find out what he’s just done — and that’s the subject of my column in today’s newspaper — you believe him.

For him, the route to rejuvenation runs along the Appalachian Trail, the famed foot passage that goes for 2,179 miles through 14 states from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Maine’s Mount Katahdin.

Parts of it are quite tough to traverse.

According to the Wingfoot trail guide, there are 91 vertical miles of climbing and ascents. Some 25 percent of the people who start the Trail quit 30 miles into it. Less than 15 percent of those who set out to hike the Trail in one continuous trek — usually taking 5 to 7 months — ever complete it.

And yet 10 days ago Niekamp completed the Trail for the third time — something only 30 people in the world have done.

“It’s a great way to blow out the cobwebs in one’s life,” he said. “It’s a good physical exercise. It’s good mentally. Out there I feel younger, stronger.

“I call it my personal Fountain of Youth.”

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