

Grandma Gatewood Took a Walk

by Catherine Bush

© Catherine Bush 2023

Grandma Gatewood Took a Walk

Synopsis:

In 1955, sixty-seven-year-old Emma “Grandma” Gatewood called her son and told him she was “going for a walk.” What she forgot to mention was that the walk would encompass all 2,050 miles of the Appalachian Trail. As we join Emma on her adventure, we relive with her the hills and valleys, obstacles and detours of her Life that led her to make history as the first woman to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.

Cast size: 2 (1f, 1m)

Emma “Grandma” Gatewood - 50’s-60’s, an Appalachian farm woman who has seen much and endured.

The following roles are to be played by the same actor:

P.C. Gatewood - 50’s-60’s, Emma’s abusive husband

Hugh Caldwell - 50’s-60’s, Emma’s father, a one-legged drunk

Dr. Monroe – 40’s, a local doctor

Burris Hall – 30’s, a Park Ranger

Nelson Gatewood – 30’s, Emma’s son

Slade – 40’s, suspicious farmer, lives near A.T.

Frank Callahan – 30’s-40’s, a reporter

Warren Large – 40’s, a bird-watcher

Mary Snow - 20’s, Sports Illustrated writer

Weatherman - 40’s, works for the National Weather Service

Howard Bell - 30’s, hiker on the A.T.

Sheriff – arrests Emma

Mayor – bails Emma out of jail

ACT I

SETTING: *An amalgamation of crates that can be stacked in different ways to represent various locations in the life of EMMA GATEWOOD. Among these crates we'll find a National Geographic Magazine.*

AT RISE: *A crate sits center stage. Lights up on EMMA GATEWOOD standing on it. She holds a walking stick in one hand, and has a homemade denim sack tossed over the opposite shoulder.*

EMMA

(Singing)
Oh beautiful for spacious skies
For amber waves of grain...

(Beat. She notices the audience.)

Here I stand
atop a mountain.
A mountain in Maine.
A mountain called Katahdin.
Elevation five thousand
two hundred
sixty-eight feet.
Sometimes
atop this mountain
clouds are so thick
you can't see your hand front of your face.
Not today.
Today
September 25th, 1955
blue sky.
Wind, fierce and cold.
I can see for miles every direction.
The view is...

(She looks. She can't find the words.)

Words elude me.

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience)

If I was a painter
a poet
I could a looked over all this
and written words like
“spacious skies”
or “amber waves of grain.”
But I ain’t a painter.
Nor a poet.
I’m a mother.
A grandmother.
I make a good rhubarb pie.
Decent pot roast.
And I love to walk.

The last 146 days
I walked over two thousand miles
through 14 states.
First woman to solo thru-hike
the Appalachian Trail.
And the question
the one question
everybody asked me...
Why?
Why’d you risk your life?
Expose yourself to rain, snow, sleet, ice
mud, rocks, swollen rivers?
Bears, wolves, rattlesnakes?
Why do it?
Why make this journey?

I told ‘em
“I thought it would be a lark.”
But that didn’t satisfy ‘em.
Folks kept insisting
there must be more.
A deeper reason.
But there ain’t.
I thought it would be a lark.
I wanted an adventure.
That’s it.
The end.

(She looks around at the audience.)

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience)

I can see from the looks on your faces
 you don't believe me neither.
 Maybe some of you even think I'm flat out lying.
 But if you'd ever walked the trail
 you'd know

It ain't about the why.
 It's about the journey.

(The sound of wind.)

Storm's moving in.
 Gotta leave soon.
 Gotta make my way back down the mountain
 else be trapped.

I been trapped before
 but I fought like the devil and escaped.
 The Great Escape...

We'll start there.
 We'll call that
 the beginning of my journey.

My name is Emma Gatewood.
 I'm a 67-year-old woman from
 Gallia County, Ohio.
 You can call me Grandma.

(Music under as she steps off the crate and moves to another location.)

When most folks think of Ohio
 they think flat.
 Flat roads.
 Flat fields.
 Flat sky.
 Flat dialect.

(EMMA speaks in the flat, nasal dialect of a mid-westerner.)

“Oh my God, take your hands out of your pockets.”

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience, regular dialect.)

Flat.

Was the glacier what did it.

Million years ago
 this big wall a ice come through,
 bully in the schoolyard,
 slow and steady.
 Bulldozed hills.
 Ripped out trees.
 Smashed flat everything in its path.
 That everything was Ohio.
 Well
 most all of Ohio.

There's a part
 down in the southeast corner
 butts up 'gainst West Virginia.
 That part of Ohio
 resisted the glacier.
 Didn't let it in.
 That part of Ohio
 retained its trees
 its hills
 its dignity.
 Retained its cadence a speech.
 Speech that matched its landscape.
 That part of Ohio
 ain't flat.
 That part of Ohio is where I was born –
 place called Mercerville –
 on October the 25th
 1887.

Know what else is flat?
 A National Geographic magazine.

*(She pulls the August 1949 edition of National Geographic out of
 the crate and displays it horizontally.)*

See?
 Flat as a pancake.

(Beat. She looks around.)

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience)

You folks look confused.
I get it.
I switched from talking 'bout the
time and place I was born
to talking 'bout
the National Geographic.

Here's the thing:
this story
its shape
its direction...?
It's like my walk.

It has hills and valleys
twists and turns
detours
side trips.

Many a time
I'd be on the trail looking to make camp.
No shelter.
No food.
I'd wander off a mile or two
'til I found a town
or some good folks willing to give me a bed
or a barn to sleep in.
Then
the next morning
it was back to the trail.
Out and back.
See what I'm saying?
Nothing linear 'bout hiking the A.T.
So bear with me.
We'll get to the end all right.

So...
National Geographic Magazine
August 1949 issue
laying flat on a table in the waiting room of a doctor's office.
I'm well acquainted with the doctor's office.

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience)

Spent a lot of time there courtesy of my husband
P.C. Gatewood.

(P.C enters her memory.)

But that's another detour
For later on down the trail...

(P.C. disappears.)

When I first laid eyes on this
August 1949 National Geographic magazine
it was already five years old.
Picked it up.
Thumbed through well-worn pages.
Won't expecting much.
Nothing life-changing anyways.
Just passing time.

First article was called
"Our Vegetable Travelers."
Lots of pictures.
Illustrations.
Potatoes.
Lima Beans.
Squash, Kale, Brussel Sprouts...

I was getting hungry reading 'bout them vegetables.
Vegetables travelling the world
coming from places like
Chile
Guatemala
India
all them faraway places.

Somehow
them same vegetables
wound up growing in my garden here in Ohio

(She turns a page.)

Turns out sweet corn comes from Peru.

EMMA (cont.)

(To audience)

I love me an ear of sweet corn
 roasted tender
 dripping with butter and salt.
 Gnawing it off the cob in rows of
 left to right
 left to right...

It ain't just the taste.
 Eating it made me feel...
 made me feel *strong*
 powerful
 my teeth ripping into that kernel of goodness...
 It was like...
 like eating Life.
 Growing up
 it was the one good thing.

I remember playing in the corn patch when I's little.
 My daddy grew corn to feed the chickens with.
 To make his whiskey with.

HUGH (O.S.)

Emma!

EMMA

(To audience)

My daddy's name was Hugh Caldwell...

HUGH (O.S.)

Emma!

EMMA

(To audience)

His people come from Scotland
 long way back.
 Settled here in Ohio
 farmed the land...

(HUGH CALDWELL appears. He's a little drunk.)

HUGH

EMMA!

EMMA

What is it, Daddy?

HUGH

What'd I tell you 'bout dragging your feet?

EMMA

I ain't...

(HUGH interrupts, coming towards her, shuffling his feet.)

HUGH

Shuffle.

Shuffle.

Shuffle.

That's how you do.

Drives me crazy.

Man wants to take a nap
and all the time

Shuffle

Shuffle

keeping me awake.

Pick up your feet, girl.

EMMA

Yes, Daddy.

HUGH

I got fifteen children.

All of 'em but you pick up their feet...

(HUGH looks around at the audience.)

Why they here?

EMMA

They're here cuz of me.

HUGH

You?

Why?

You ain't special.

Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle
that's all you are.

Daddy... EMMA

You fought in a War? HUGH

No, sir but... EMMA

I did. HUGH
 War Between the States.
 I was there.
 You tell 'em that?

Not yet... EMMA

Union soldier tried and true! HUGH
 I was special.

(To audience, saluting)

Private Hugh Caldwell
 Company D
 First Regiment
 West Virginia Veteran Infantry.

(End salute)

Daddy... EMMA

(To audience, ignoring her) HUGH
 Joined up November
 1861.
 17 years old.
 Saw lots of action.
 Charleston.
 Buffington Island.
 Cloyd's Mountain...

(Beat as he considers.)

EMMA

Thank you, Daddy...

HUGH

(Interrupting, to audience)

Opequon
Fisher's Hill
Cedar Creek...

That last one
Cedar Creek
that was October 18 and 64.
Heavy fog.
Shenandoah Valley.
We was sleeping.
Johnny Reb attacked early
surprised us.
Fighting was fierce.
Bullets like hailstorm.
We fell back.
Sun come up.
Fog burns off.
Still they come.
Men dying.
Morning becomes noon becomes afternoon.
Me and my unit was pinned down behind a rock fence...

(He snaps his fingers at EMMA.)

The fence, girl.
The fence!

*(EMMA places another crate on top of the first, creating the fence.
HUGH pushes EMMA out of the way and crouches in front of it, as
if the enemy was on the upstage side, addressing audience.)*

There we was
imagine this now
there we was
pinned 'gainst this fence.
Bullets
spraying over our heads.

HUGH (cont.)

Pew!

Pew!

Pew!

No way a knowing how close them Rebs was
'less one of us stuck his head over the fence
peeked a look.

But that would be suicide.

Only a fool would do that.

A fool...

or a hero.

That's when ol' Sarge said...

(To EMMA)

You be Sarge.

EMMA

Daddy, no...

HUGH

Do it!

*(He grabs EMMA's arm and drags her down with him. HUGH
turns back to audience.)*

That's when ol' Sarge said...

(He looks at EMMA. She hesitates.)

Go on now!

Say the words

(To audience)

That's when ol' Sarge said...

EMMA

(As the Sarge)

Boys

I need me a volunteer to reconnoiter the enemy position.

HUGH

(To audience)
Remember now
them bullets
they're zipping over the fence.
Pew!
Pew!
Pew!

EMMA

(Still resigned)
Who among you
is brave enough to look over the fence?

HUGH

(To audience)
Pew!
Pew!
Pew!

EMMA

(Let's wrap it up)
Who among you
is a hero?

HUGH

(To audience)
'Fore them other boys could even think to open their mouths
I shot my head up.
Snuck a peek over that fence.
Just like this...

(He quickly peeks over the fence then hunkers back down.)

You see that?
I was real quick.
Here
let me show you again.

EMMA

Daddy...

(He quickly peeks over the fence then hunkers back down.)

HUGH

(To audience)
See?

EMMA

That was real good, Daddy, but...

HUGH

(Interrupting, to audience)
What I did there?
Risking my life like that?
Changed the course of the battle.
In that brief moment
I was able to ascertain the enemy position.
With that information
General Sheridan himself
commanded a counterattack.
Had those Rebs running!

(To EMMA)

I'm done with the fence.

(EMMA removes the top crate and places it elsewhere. HUGH takes a seat on the remaining crate, and wearily stretches out one leg. To audience)

Later on that day
during the counterattack
I caught a bullet in the leg
just back of the shin.
In and out
through the calf muscle.
Wrapped it up tight.
Kept on fighting

By the time the battle was over
I was hurting bad.
Dragging that leg.
Foot scraping the ground.
Shuffle.
Shuffle.
Shuffle.

HUGH (cont.)

(To audience)

Got infected.
Them doctors
them butchers
took my leg off
just above the knee.

(He rubs his leg, below the knee.)

I can still feel it sometimes
the ache.
The missing of what used to be a part of me.
Does something to a man
that kind of pain.

(He stands up.)

I went home.
Got married.
Had a passel of children.
Tried my best at farming.
It's hard work
being a one-legged farmer.
Took up making whiskey instead
from corn what once upon a time come all the way from Peru.
Some folks call me a reprobate.
Maybe I am.
But for one moment in time
I was a hero.
I was special.

(To EMMA as he exits.)

Pick up your feet, Emma.
Pick up your feet.

(He is gone.)

EMMA

(To audience)

Georgia
North Carolina
Tennessee

EMMA

(To audience)

Virginia
 West Virginia
 Maryland
 Pennsylvania
 New Jersey
 New York
 Connecticut
 Massachusetts
 Vermont
 New Hampshire
 Maine

Them's the 14 states the A.T. passes through.
 Trail itself is 2050 miles long
 and runs along the spine of the Appalachian Mountain range

August 5th, 1948
 Earl Shaffer becomes the first man to thru-hike the trail.
 Done it wearing one pair of shoes.
 Them shoes was in tatters by the end.
 Leastways
 that's what it says in the National Geographic

(She holds up the magazine and sits on the crate.)

Yep.
 I'm still setting in the waiting room
 waiting to see the doctor.
 Learned everything there is to know 'bout our vegetable travelers.
 Moved on to the next article:
 "Skyline Trail from Maine to Georgia."
 Article what changed my life.

(DR. MONROE enters in a lab coat, carrying a clipboard. He consults the clipboard and looks around.)

DR. MONROE

Mary Sue Hood?

(Someone off stands up.)

This way, please.

(DR. MONROE exits.)

EMMA

(To audience)

Some folks resent waiting at a doctor's office.
 Not me.
 I like it.
 It's peaceful.
 Quiet.
 No matter how much pain you're in
 help is on the way.
 I recall this one time
 P.C. had hauled off
 slugged me good...

(P.C. enters)

P.C.

That's where you're gonna start it?
 Out of all the things you could say about me
 you wanna talk 'bout that time
 that one time...

EMMA

One time?!
 You been nipping at my Daddy's whiskey.

P.C.

I don't drink.
 You know I don't drink.

EMMA

You don't need drink to do the ugly things you done.

P.C.

How about the good things I done?
 Providing for my family?
 My wife?
 Our eleven children?

EMMA

Worked ever bit as hard as you...

P.C.

How 'bout when I designed and *built*
the new schoolhouse at Swan Creek?

EMMA

P.C....

P.C.

The Christmas trees I cut down for the young'uns?
Or...
how 'bout when I first met you?
You remember that?

(Beat.)

You was walking down the road...

EMMA

Coming from church.
Sunday evening service...

P.C.

That's right...

EMMA

Getting dark

(P.C. steps on the other crate and holds invisible reins.)

P.C.

I was riding by on my horse...

EMMA

That's right.
His name was Dick.

P.C.

That's right.
I rode up next to you...
My eyes beheld the most beautiful woman...

EMMA

(She doesn't want to remember this)

P.C....

P.C.

(Ignoring her)
Stopped my horse...

(He pulls up on his reins. They are back in time.)

Whoa...
Hey there.

EMMA

Hey.

P.C.

Ain't seen you around her before.

EMMA

Staying with my cousin.

P.C.

Who's your cousin?

EMMA

Carrie Trowbridge.

P.C.

Oh sure, I know Carrie.
She's good people.

EMMA

I work for her grandmother
Mrs. Pickett

P.C.

Pickett...
She live near Sugar Creek?

EMMA

That's her.

P.C.

So you're Carrie Trowbridge's cousin.
What's your name?

Emma Caldwell. EMMA

Hey there, Emma.
I'm Perry Clayton Gatewood.
But folks call me P.C. P.C.

(He extends a hand down. She shakes it.)

Nice to meet you... EMMA

P.C. P.C.

P.C. EMMA

Can I give you a ride home? P.C.

I don't... EMMA

Be dark soon.
Pretty girl like you shouldn't be walking alone P.C.

(EMMA hesitates. He offers her his hand.)

Come on....

(She takes his hand and steps up on the crate behind him.)

(To audience)
I got up behind him on that horse... EMMA

Hold tight now. P.C.

EMMA

(To audience)
But I wouldn't put my arms around him.

P.C.

You holding on?

EMMA

(To audience)
That would be too...
Familiar.

P.C.

Gonna fall off if you don't hold tight.

EMMA

(To audience)
Gripped the saddle instead.

P.C.

Okay then...

(He flicks the reins)

Let's go, boy!

EMMA

(To audience)
Slid right off the back

(She steps backwards off the crate.)

P.C.

(Pulling the reins)
Whoa.

(He looks down at her. Beat. He holds out his hand. She takes it and steps back on the crate behind him. He waits. She slowly steals her arms around his waist. P.C. flicks the reins.)

Giddup.