



The Underground Movement

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A VISIT TO THE OLD LEATHER MAN'S CAVE

December 2012

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— Julie Hulten —

“One misty, moisty morning,
When cloudy was the weather,
I chanced to meet an old man
Clothed all in leather.”

So says Mother Goose, and so begins Dan DeLuca's book, *The Old Leather Man* (Garnet Books, 2008), the most current and extensive source for all things Leather Man.

Indeed, in rain or snow, in heat or cold, in sunshine or darkness, this mysterious man passed back and forth through Connecticut, as far west as the Hudson and up into the Berkshires, possibly as far as Canada. After journeying thus from 1856 to circa 1882, he settled into a predictable circuit that took him around Connecticut and into eastern New York State. His route was regular, 365 miles and unchanging. Every 34 days, he would re-appear—a forlorn and reticent figure in a sixty-pound leather suit that he had stitched for himself from old boot tops.

As he traveled through at least 41 towns in southwestern Connecticut and southeastern New York, he bothered no one. Even when “Tramp Laws” were passed, people were reluctant to have him arrested, so benign was his character. He seldom spoke, and then only with grunts or gestures. Stopping at the same homes in each town, rarely varying, he accepted offered food and tobacco, perhaps a chance to rest, and sometimes a bit of money. Then he moved on. Only with reluctance would he allow himself to be photographed. Efforts to learn more about him were rebuffed.

Town residents mostly called him the “Old Leather Man” or “Old Leathery.” Some followed him on his route, and explored his living conditions after he had moved on. An article in the *Peekskill Blade* (October 1885) itemized the contents of a cave in the Sawmill Valley woods: “a tin

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pail, an iron frying pan, a small axe, and a few shoemaker's tools...a bed of dry leaves held in place by several pieces of chestnut rail is...the only...furniture in this dismal abode.” Reports of his appearance made regular copy in local and regional newspapers; he was a frequent topic of local gossip and speculation. Who was he? Where did he come from? Why did he trudge through all kinds of weather, living mostly on handouts, dwelling rough in caves, lean-tos, and rock shelters?¹

In 1884, an allegedly “true” account of the Leather Man's history appeared in the *Waterbury Daily American*. It was “a readable and romantic yarn.” According to the *Derby Transcript* (August 1884), however, it was “...drawn largely on a vivid imagination.” To this day, his history and even his true name are unknown. In March 1889, he was found dead, much as he had lived: alone and in a cave. The cause of death was reported as being due to blood poisoning from a cancerous growth that he had on his lip.

Today, as then, there are no answers to the many questions surrounding this strange and eccentric wanderer. This very mystery prompts countless individuals to seek out the primitive “dwellings” he used and/or fashioned for himself. Scattered throughout the areas he frequented, the “Leather Man Caves” lure hikers to clamber over rocks, up hills, and along streams to see...see what? Is it possible that some hidden bit of information will appear in one of them to set the story straight? Could the ghost of the Leather Man manifest himself and provide some answers? Will some forgotten artifact be exposed to the curious that will provide a necessary key to answering the mystery? Doubtful, and yet, the draw is there and we *will* go adventuring and perhaps chance “to meet an old man clothed all in leather.”

¹Editor's Note: Following close of the regular trail-maintenance season in early December, members of the Sleeping Giant Park Association's Trails Crew begin a regular series of off-season hikes to various sites around the state. On Sunday, December 9, Trails Crew members—accompanied by a few straggling members of the Hiking Committee—visited the popular Leather Man's Cave near Black Rock State Park, Watertown, CT. The hike afforded everyone an opportunity to see one of the many locations that he frequented during his long sojourns and also to contemplate the life of this enigmatic figure in Connecticut history.

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A hike to the Leather Man's Cave is an enjoyable and interesting adventure, especially when shared with friends. The trail alternates between densely forested woodland and wide-open space, and periodically follows the exposed ridges of high escarpments. Like Judges' Cave, which rests atop the West Rock Ridge in New Haven (inside a cracked boulder), the Leather Man's Cave itself is not especially impressive as caves go. However, both sites are steeped in history and a visit to either location offers hikers far more than just the hike itself.

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