

# The wet and wild Willow Aid Station Manitou's Revenge, June 20-21, 2015

by Pete Preston

Manitou's Revenge - a difficult 54 miler in the Catskills over rugged mountain climbs and descents and rocky, very technical trails. A 54 miler with a 24 hour time limit?? Probably one of the most challenging 50s there is. There are nine aid stations along the Manitou course. Some are easily accessed by aid station crews who can simply drive up with all the supplies and equipment they need. Others are more remote and setting up requires more time, thought and strong backs. They include Dutcher Notch, Mink Hollow, Silver Hollow Notch and Willow.

As an ultrarunner I've been through a lot of aid stations in ultras across the country. Each one is unique because of where it is, but otherwise they are all wonderfully the same. Every aid station that I have been to, without exception, is a welcoming time-out from the relentless forward progress that ultras demand. Aid station workers have always embraced the runners and they can't do enough to help everyone get whatever they need to keep going. I have always appreciated them and have always said, "Thanks for being here," as loudly as I could, as I am leaving the aid station. It's one of the joys of the sport, especially when some aid stations are in remote, inaccessible areas - how did you get all of this stuff here, anyway?

For the last 22 miles of the Manitou course, except for the last mile, there is no road access to any aid stations. Mink Hollow, Silver Hollow Notch and Willow are all backcountry aid stations and all of the supplies have to be carried in with strong legs and backs.

This is the short story of the birth, life and death of the Willow Aid Station and the wild time we had running the station last Saturday afternoon through Sunday morning. Willow is the last significant aid station on the course. It's about six miles from the finish. It's where five of us spent a crazy 16 hours tending to runners, most of whom were enduring very difficult conditions. And this was in

addition to being generally depleted after being smacked around by the first 48 miles of the not very user-friendly, but awesome, Manitou.

Willow is located at the intersection of two trails – the Willow Trail and the Warner's Creek Trail - high on a ridge in the woods in the middle of nowhere about two miles from Mt Tremper. All supplies for the aid station have to be backpacked up the Willow Trail which is 1.6 mile long and climbs about 1,100 feet. There are harder climbs in the Catskills but when you're slogging gallons of water and everything else to set up a cheerful oasis for runners, it's suddenly a big climb. But it's all just part of Manitou's Revenge and we were just a little story in the huge organizational juggernaut that staging an event like this is. The diabolical, omnipresent Charlie Gadol is the genius behind it all. (As you read on, you might even think that Charlie could be the modern incarnation of the Manitou.)

So on the Thursday before the race, Charlie, Joe, Mendy, Fred and I carried 22 gallons of water up to the aid station site. We felt as light as feathers when we ran back down. Then on Friday, Fred and I carried up eight more gallons plus the all-important tiki lamps.

On Saturday morning the aid station crew met at the Phoenicia Elementary School at 11:30am - Fred, Adam, Scott and Brad and me. Scott and Brad are ham radio operators. Willow is so isolated that we needed their presence for emergencies and general communication. We drove to the Willow trail head and Joe and Jimmy were there to help carry more stuff. They had other things to do but wanted to be there to help out. That's just because they are good guys who like being part of all this or we could say that they were under the spell of the Great Spirit of Manitou.

What is Manitou and why does it take revenge? The Catskill Escarpment rises up steeply and often precipitously from the Hudson Valley. You can see it clearly from the New York Thruway and from the Taconic Parkway. The first 19 miles of the race mostly takes place along the top of the escarpment. The Catskill Escarpment is also known as the Great Wall of Manitou. It seems that among indigenous North Americans in various cultures, the Manitou is equivalent to the

Great Spirit that is interpreted as a life force that resides in all things. It seems too that while indigenous Americans occupied much of the Hudson Valley below their Great Wall of Manitou, they did not live high up on the Wall. They went there but did not live there. Was there a reverence or a fear of the Wall that led to the name? It would lead one to think that if modern runners want to tread along the top of the Escarpment in disregard for the sacred importance of the spirit of the mountains, then those runners should be ready for some Manitou's revenge. Looking at some of the runners who staggered into Willow late on Saturday night or early Sunday morning, Manitou was definitely stickin' it to those guys. (Are you thinking about Charlie as the Manitou right now?)



Bringing supplies up to Willow early Saturday afternoon (Photo: Brad)

We got to the ridge-top site of the Willow Aid Station at about 1:15pm on Saturday. The race had already been in progress for eight hours, but we weren't thinking that any runners were going to show up soon. Without really knowing what we were doing (although Fred and I have been through plenty of ultramarathon aid stations so we had a sense of it all) we quickly got set up. We were making it up as we went – how about we do this? Or let's try that.

It was cloudy but dry. Rain was predicted for later. We strung a tarp up between the trees right over the trail. When the storms came it was a life saver for us and it protected the food that we would offer the runners. The runners just enjoyed the moments they were there without having rain pouring on them.



Fred and Adam getting set up early Saturday afternoon. It was still dry and clear.

Meanwhile, Scott and Brad made their own little ham radio communications lean-to, decorated with a string of little LED lights. They got set up and made all of the connections to whomever they needed to contact in the Manitou ham radio network. We learned a lot about the mysteries of ham radio and the passion that ham radio operators have for what they do. That Scott and Brad were happy to spend about 16 hours with us in those crazy conditions, was a testament to how important their avocation is. They were good company.





Scott and Brad at their vital Manitou communications center.

We also set up the tiki lamps. Boy, those tiki lamps were huge on Saturday night and Sunday morning. Instead of being relegated to lighting someone's back yard barbie, they performed mighty service in brightening the aid station in the pre-sunset gloom of the misty ridge top, and then later minimizing the darkness and lighting up the raindrops, making the aid station that much more welcoming. We placed one lamp about 80 yards down the trail as a beacon for the runners that we were up ahead. The flame looked like it was just floating in the soggy blackness. It looked very cool.

On the creative side Adam and Fred started building a serving area out of rocks that we piled up. It was just a pile of rocks but it worked great as the photo shows. We served all of the ultra staples as you can see, including warm chicken broth (popular), potatoes and salt (popular), PBJs (popular), Coke, water and Gatorade, pretzels, MnMs, Skittles, gummy bears. Hey, we were a full service operation, man. Well pretty much. Some people *did* ask for ice. We would do a double take and politely say, no, we don't have ice.





The heart and soul of Willow. This looks disorganized but everything had a place.

In the picture below you can see Adam making the PBJs. He's sitting in the only chair we brought up to the aid station. We took turns sitting in it. As the night wore on, some of the runners appreciated sitting in it too.



Adam working on the PBJ's at our full service food court.

Suffice it to say that we all enjoyed the heck out of what we did. It was a strange thing and went way beyond just being a volunteer, or “giving back” as that tired cliché goes. It was just plain fun to have to start with nothing but a bunch of stuff that we carried up on our backs and somehow figure out a way to make it all work so that we could help the runners get to the finish of this nutty race.

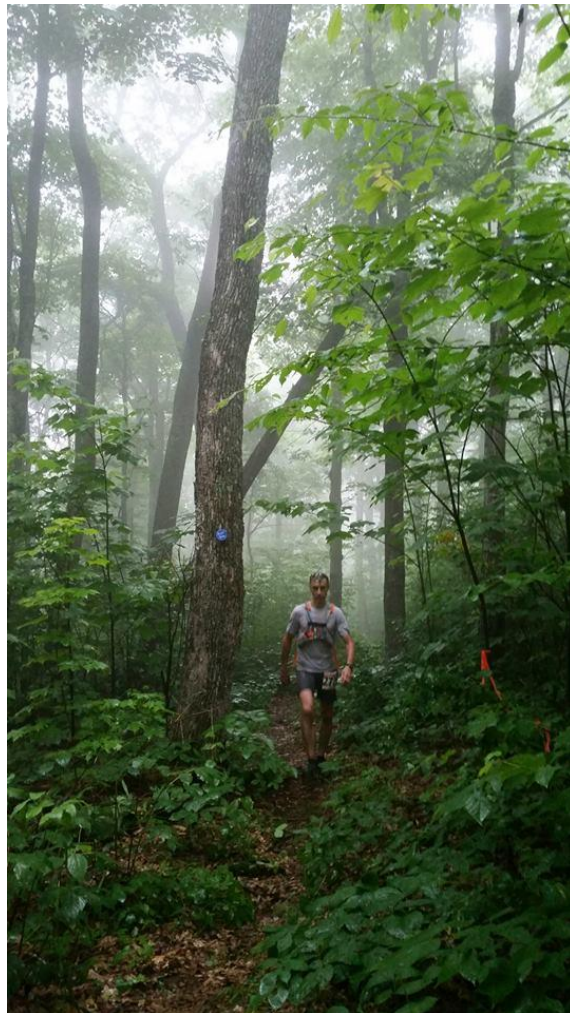
After about an hour of fussing, we were ready and we thought we had a pretty good setup for a little backwoods aid station. We figured that because we were the last aid station the runners would be so spread out that we would never be too busy at any one time. I think the most runners we had simultaneously was four.

The first solo runner to come through was Brian Rusiecki at 3:48pm. He stayed for less than 60 seconds and took off skipping over the unrunnable jumble of rocks that led right out of the aid station. It was a pretty sight. The rocks were also still dry. The next few runners also enjoyed the relatively dry conditions and stayed for a few words and a handful of this or a mouthful of that. They were all in and out in less than two minutes. I was in charge of the time in/time out sheets and it was amazing how little time most people spent at the aid station especially through probably the first 2/3rds of the field.

The rest of this story is about the weather. The moisture in the air made its presence felt about mid-afternoon as a mist slowly enveloped the area. Thick, we lost sight of trees we could see earlier. Then the rain started at Willow at about 4:30pm. Gentle at first but it became steady. Then it would let up a little and then come on again. This pattern lasted till after dark, and darkness sure came early for the longest day of the year. The runners kept coming. Those fast guys got the benefit of beating not only the dark but also the treachery of the wet rocks we kept hearing about later. The fastest woman was Sheryl Wheeler. She came through like a train at 5:34pm, her hiking poles flying and her glasses bejeweled with raindrops.

But here's the thing about the rain: as it got more and more crappy, just about everyone was still upbeat and living the adventure of what Manitou was throwing at them. Knowing how difficult some parts of the course are at the best of times

– I’m thinking Devil’s Path and the long, rocky descent of Mt Tremper – the slippery conditions must have surely slowed a lot of people down. But they were relentless. We were stoked by their determination. The rain became steady and intense after about 10pm. There were also lightning and thunder. Scott took the radio antenna down till the lightning passed. The slower people of the witching hour became less frequent. Long periods of darkness down the trail and suddenly an eerie soft growing glow would appear through the black wet air. An apparition was on its way. One of us would call out, “Runner!” and then in Pythonesque fashion, we all yelled “Runner!” We would snap to attention. We hoped they felt our excitement. He or she would stop...ahhh... and add new stories to the litany of descriptions of what everyone was going through. They lingered under



Yay!! Welcome to Willow...what can we get for you? (Photo: Brad)



the tarp, sometimes they sat in our chair, they ate, they drank, they talked, ate and drank some more. But they all pushed on. There was no dancing over the rocks though. They left our tarp haven and staggered out into the monsoon with every footstep seeming to require a decision.

Finally, at about 4am, the sweeps, Joe and Stewart, came through with the last runner. She had no chance of making it to the finish before the 24 hour time limit was up in one hour. She should have been taken off the course, but Joe and Stewart were content to guide her to the finish anyway.

With their passing it was time for us to go. Our work was done. It was still pouring rain, still dark, especially when we had to extinguish our awesome tiki lamps. We packed everything up as quick as we could, keeping everything as dry as we could. We also had to do our best to make it seem like the aid station had never been there. After 20-30 minutes of frantic stuffing and rolling and making just enough carry-able bags and packs as we could, we set off down the Willow Trail. The other couple of times we had gone down the Willow Trail on those previous days, we were unburdened, it was daytime and it was dry. We ran down that sucker each time. At 4:30 on Sunday morning it was none of those things. Most of us slipped and fell, being as loaded up and unbalanced as we were, but we got down safely enough. It was all part of the fun of Manitou and Willow. We enjoyed ourselves to the end, and we all said that the 16 hours we were at Willow passed quickly and interestingly, in addition to the simple necessity of just being there. Good times and great memories.

The final word should come from Brad as he wrote in an email a couple days later:

It was a true privilege to experience such a unique event and to learn about a community I wasn't even aware existed. Prior to this event I hadn't a single clue what ultramarathons were about, and had little idea of what to expect. The epic nature exceeded anything imaginable, it was a real thrill. Thankfully we didn't have any emergencies to report, but I still didn't need to work very hard to stave off boredom.