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A Line of Scouts

*Personal history from Mead Base Camp
in Center Sandwich, New Hampshire*

William Geller



JOIN ME ON A WEEKLONG GROUP BACKPACKING TRIP IN AUGUST 1966. I was a 19-year-old leader of a group of 53, mostly Boy Scouts and a few leaders. We would walk through New Hampshire's Sandwich Notch, cross over Sandwich Dome, pass through Waterville Valley and Greeley Ponds, into the depths of the Pemigewasset Wilderness. Next we would climb the Hancocks on a side trip then traverse the Bonds to Zeacliff Trail and Zealand Falls, down into Crawford Notch, and up Crawford Path to Mount Washington. We would exit down Tuckerman Ravine Trail.

Yes, the group numbered 53. Today's Leave No Trace principles would break up a group like this into five groups. Back then, we rarely saw anyone else in the White Mountains. We did not meet another backpacking group on this trip. The only place we saw anyone was at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Zealand Falls Hut. Only a few hikers shared Crawford Path and Tuckerman Ravine Trail with us.

How did we keep track of all of the people? How did we cook for them all? Suppose someone got hurt? For eight weeks of each summer from 1964 through 1968, my home was the southern end of the White Mountain National Forest, near today's Sandwich Range Wilderness. The place, today known as Friends of Mead Base Conservation Center, was called, officially, the New Hampshire Daniel Webster Council Boy Scouts of America Mead Wilderness Base Camp. The old house and tenting sites lie off Sandwich Notch Road, at the foot of Mount Israel.

The four trip leaders—Rangers Jerry McDonald, Dean and Dave Cilley, and me, all under 22—greeted everyone and introduced them to others. By midafternoon, scouts and parents gathered in a circle with packs to begin this adventure. McDonald told us this year's group was the largest ever, roughly twice the size of a normal trip.

Ranger Jerry gave us a speech about packing. I remember it going like this:

“Everyone wants to have fun on this trip, and that starts with the weight of your pack. So, let's begin with each of you emptying the contents of your pack. Here's what I want you to put in your packing pile. The first item is a rubberized waterproof bag; our canvas packs are not waterproof, so, if you don't have one, we will loan you one. Include your sleeping bag and a ground cloth, which

William Geller in 1967, when he was known as “Ranger Bill,” pausing while leading a group over a suspension bridge spanning the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River. This bridge no longer stands. COURTESY OF WILLIAM GELLER

will keep the bottom of your sleeping bag dry. Don't include an air mattress. From your mess kit, take only your cup, bowl, and spoon. Pack your raincoat or poncho. Include your compass, a pocketknife, if you want, small bar of soap, and toothbrush and paste. For clothes, pack only two pair socks, two changes of underwear, something for warmth, like a wool jack shirt or sweater, and one extra shirt you'll keep clean for special occasions."

He told us to leave behind our bug nets, toilet paper, canteens, flashlights, large sheath knives, towels, hatchets or saws, and first-aid kits—the leaders carried one for the group.

"Now we'll distribute other necessities," he said. These included 8-by-8-foot canvas tarps, under which four would sleep; the cooking gear for the group—eight large 25-cup pots and four 9-inch fry pans—and a scouring pad per person; and dehydrated food for the first day.

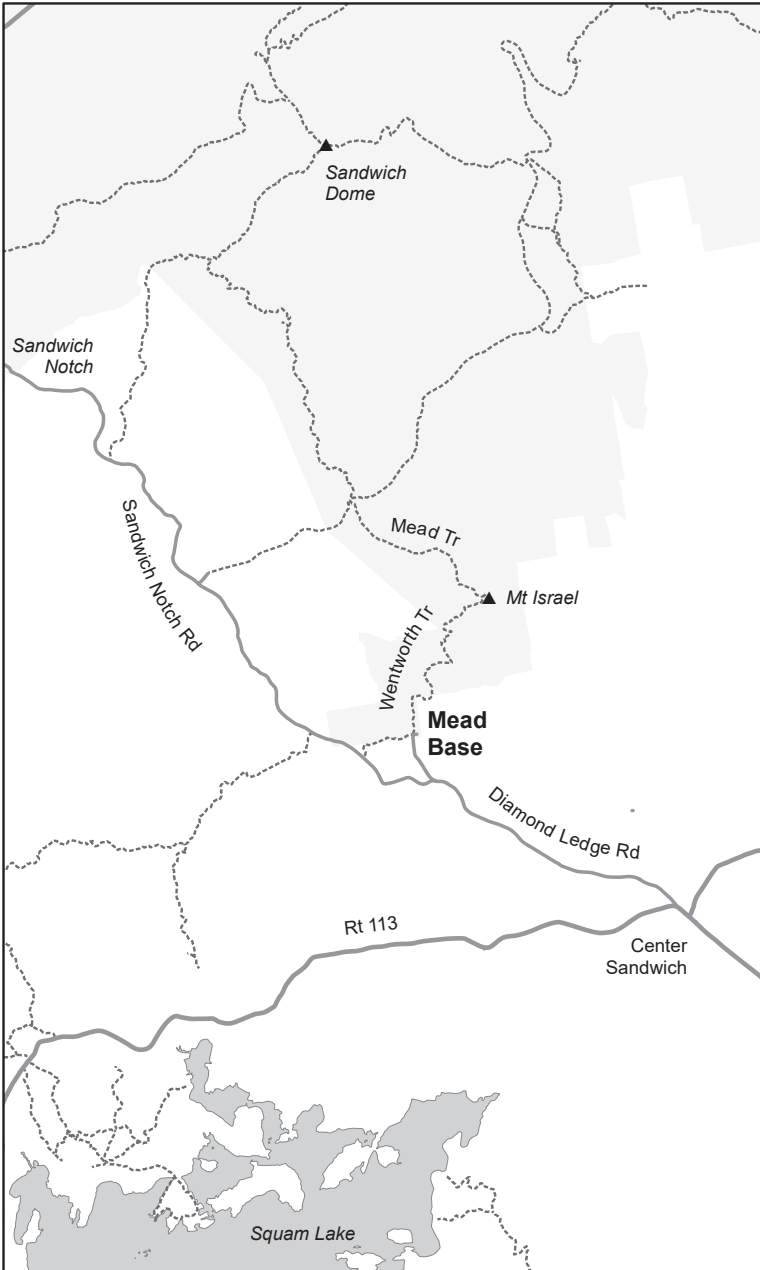
"We'll be having three food drops," he said. (Someone would deliver our food at designated road crossings at an appointed time.) "If you have a large pot, stuff your gear inside it; we will be keeping the outside of the pots as clean as the inside."

He then said, "Go ahead and repack."

We did not carry water but drank water untreated from streams and ponds. One heavy flashlight served the group. We cooked over fires for two meals a day, rain or shine, using only wood: "If you can't snap it, scrap it." We appreciated the relatively new dehydrated trail food.

We left Mead Base by 7 A.M. on a Monday morning and hiked single file. We stayed together without exception. Everyone walked at a pace the person behind him could keep. If the person behind fell back, then the person in front slowed down. When the first person in line reached a trail junction, he stopped and everyone behind also stopped. At break or mealtime we left our packs in a line at the edge of the trail. Any time the line stopped or started, the lead scout started counting off to be sure everyone was present.

From the empty, dirt Sandwich Notch Road, we turned onto Algonquin Trail, which took us to Sandwich Dome. In those days the summit was open, with just a few short trees. A magnificent cairn stood six or so feet in diameter and more than seven feet high. We joked with the scouts about climbing up the cairn a few feet to touch 4,000 feet. We could see Mount Washington, Waterville Valley, the expanse of the Pemigewasset wilderness (which became a federally designated Wilderness in 1984), and the Bonds—all on our path north to Washington.



Mead Base Camp is situated at the end of a back road in Center Sandwich, New Hampshire, at the southern end of the White Mountain National Forest.

LARRY GARLAND/AMC

Sandwich Dome was also the site of the only accident on a trip I ever had; it took place on the same route two years later, in 1968. A scout fell and injured his leg after we had departed the summit area. Everyone stopped. Some scouts went in search of two long poles for a litter; others dug into their packs for jackets and raincoats for the litter's "basket"; the remainder rested for the carry down the mountain. The scouts were simply putting to use their training. Four scouts lifted the litter and the rest of the group followed. With the large group and frequent rotations, the litter and all the scouts arrived at the food drop in Waterville Valley close to the appointed time. This was the only time in my work in the White Mountains when someone did not complete a trip.

But back to 1966: We descended Sandwich Dome on Drakes Brook Trail into Waterville Valley, and everyone was looking forward to cooling off in the brook. Once we had collected the food drop, we drifted into the woods near Drakes Brook to set up sleeping tarps and collect firewood for both the evening and morning meals. A substantial number of scouts had been with us on previous trips, knew the routine, and provided guidance. No one ever asked me where to pitch a tarp, and no one ever complained about getting wet on a rainy night. The motto became, "We can camp anyplace." I've revisited many of our camping places, and in most cases, my thought was, Where in heck did they put up those tarps?

Likewise, I now shake my head at how we cooked for 53 on a single fire. By the end of the week, everyone had taken a turn stirring the dehydrated food with long sticks, trying to keep it from burning inside the large pots suspended on a pole. Everyone took turns tending the fire and washing pots. The breakfast menu was the same every day: cocoa, pancakes (which scouts labeled "sinkers"), maple syrup, and applesauce.

As soon as we cooked the last pancake, other scouts were filling the cooking pots and dousing the fire. By using only small sticks, we left no partially burned chunks of wood. We scattered the leftover wood, ashes, and the charred rocks and covered the area with fresh leaves and other natural debris.

On Tuesday, we passed Waterville Valley Inn, where guests were drinking coffee on the porch. Jerry called for a song, and we waved. That drew more people to the porch. We sang a lot on the trail, but we rarely yelled.

At the end of the road, not far above the inn, was the Greeley Pond trail-head and our entry point to the Pemi. We took a break at Greeley Pond, one of those special, picturesque places. No one was in the shelter area, so we did



“Ranger Bill” Geller demonstrates cooking pancakes for the boys at Mead Base Camp.

COURTESY OF WILLIAM GELLER

our usual pickup of trash in the fireplace and other litter. Often people cooked in cans and aluminum foil, which they apparently thought would eventually burn up. The scouts also picked up any litter along the trails. Another motto: “Leave it cleaner than you found it.”

By early afternoon, we had left the litter and picked up the food drop at the Kancamagus Highway crossing, and we had reached the Cedar Brook and Hancock Loop trails junction. Here we went west off Cedar Brook Trail, crossed North Fork Hancock Branch, and camped. Some scouts took a side trip up the Hancocks on the Loop Trail, and others relaxed, picked berries, and cooled off in the stream.

SOON AFTER WE LEFT IN THE MORNING ON CEDAR BROOK TRAIL, WE started dropping to the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River and got a view of Bondcliff and Mount Bond, our destination. Everyone loved the open area from the cliffs to the summit. On the summit they looked back to Sandwich Dome and ahead to Mount Washington.

Beyond Bond and West Bond, near the junction with the trail to Guyot Shelter, we stopped. Typically we avoided using shelters. Here, we drifted well off the trail. We knew this was a lousy place for water and a fire. While tarp mates set up, others went for water at the shelter, a bit of a hike. Jerry and I had found a rock pile for a fire site. The scouts lifted a layer of rocks from it,

set them aside, then filled the crevasses with small rocks to minimize coals falling deeper into the rocks. Once we were done in the morning, the moss-covered rocks they had carefully lifted off were put back in place. If anyone else ever used this fire site, they too kept it camouflaged.

Thursday felt easy. We left the Guyot area, stopped at Zeacliff, then Zealand Falls Hut, where the hut crew peppered the scouts with questions: Where did you start hiking? Where are you going? How long have you been out? Where have you camped? Who is doing the cooking? What are you eating? What are you using for tents? Where are the food drops? How do you stay together?

The boys enjoyed the attention. From there we went on across A–Z Trail to Crawford Notch and our last food drop. We went up Crawford Path a way, cut into the woods to Gibbs Brook, crossed it, and made camp.

Friday morning we entered fog so thick on Crawford Path that we couldn't see from one cairn to the next. The line stopped, I waited, but we didn't move or count off, so I made my way to the front to observe a fatherly Forest Service ridge-runner talking to the lead scouts. The first words I heard were, "How many are in your group?"

A scout replied, "Fifty-three, sir."

With a stunned face, the ridge-runner asked: "Are you all here in one group on this trail?"

The emphatic reply: "Oh, yes! Want us to count off?"

The ridge-runner smiled and said, "No, that's not necessary." He added, "Someday I'd like my son to be on a trip from your camp."

On Mount Washington, hundreds of people saw us. We arrived at the summit, placed our packs in one long neat row, put on our special-occasion shirts, and spent a couple of hours wandering and answering strangers' questions. People seemed amazed that we had been out all week.

We camped Friday night in Tuckerman Ravine near a brook west of Hermit Lake at the base of the wall of Lion Head, using our own tarps again. Jerry and I knew an old, nearly invisible, overgrown path that led to this spot, an old campsite, where we would be out of sight. The rangers had not posted any No Camping signs, but we knew they did not want folks camping there. It was a terrible mess of rusty old cans, metal, broken glass, bottles, and more—so bad no one would want to camp there, if they could find it. But we selected a couple places for trash piles and quietly got to work. The amount of trash was staggering; think of what 53 people can pick up in an hour-plus.

We did not have bags enough for all we picked up, but we figured the ravine ranger would.

As some scouts began cooking and others set up tarps, the ranger, having smelled the smoke, followed his nose to the site. He walked over to those cooking and asked who was in charge. They pointed to me. In a polite but firm tone he said, "I really can't let you camp here."

I replied, "I know, but these scouts have really worked hard to clean up the mess in this area," and I pointed out the two huge piles of trash he had not observed. "We're going to carry this out, if you have bags enough for us to use, and we'll be out before 7 A.M. tomorrow morning."

He paused and then said, "Thank you. You can spend the night here, but please don't do this again. A few of your boys can follow me and get bags."

AS IT TURNS OUT, WE PARTICIPATED IN WHAT WE WOULD NOW RECOGNIZE as forest wilderness stewardship. We were not always perfect during those five years, but the one time we did not hike in single file is when we left a trail to find a camping area. By the time of this trip, I had learned and observed a great deal. The reasons why we did what we did had to do with practical matters, such as safety, cleanliness, human decency, and respect for others. At 19, I had no conscious concept of stewardship or best practices for the preservation of a wilderness. But I loved the forest wilderness, and camping where no one else had, and not having anyone else discover that spot.

What I like to think repeated itself was that these young men continued to hike over the next 55 years and instilled in others the lessons of their Mead Base experience. They hiked in a single group that always stayed together so that no one got lost. They left no trash and carried out what others had left. They did not cut live trees. They generally camped where others did not, well away from the trail, and left no trace of a herd path or fireplace. They eliminated rogue fire sites. They left the shelters and designated camping sites for whom they were intended, single individuals and groups of two or three.

WILLIAM GELLER, a retiree who explores the outdoors in every season, lives in Farmington, Maine. His research and writing are available at his website, Mountain Explorations: sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations. "Ranger Bill" would enjoy hearing from anyone who went on a trip with him. Contact him at geller@maine.edu.