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The Old Bridle Path

"It is solved by walking"

Caroline Santinelli

G. Barnes

Look down at your thumbnail. Now imagine a flower—small, yellow, and delicate—that could fit there on the end of your finger. Dwarf cinquefoil blooms in early June for only three weeks on the treeless Franconia Ridge in the White Mountains, one of only two places in the world where it grows. The name references the clusters of five small leaves on the plant. *Cinquefoil* is French; *cinque* means five, and *foil* means leaf. Although a dwarf in size, this tiny wildflower can withstand temperatures of –40 degrees Fahrenheit.

It goes relatively unnoticed. Many down in the valley probably do not know that dwarf cinquefoil exists.

Nonetheless, when the federal government placed dwarf cinquefoil (*Potentilla robbinsiana*) on its endangered species list in 1980, scientists and hikers set out to save the delicate plant that many trampled because they didn't notice it. Alpine plants withstand harsh, freezing winters on the ridge, but boot soles and time were enough to send dwarf cinquefoil nearly to its grave. Together, the Appalachian Mountain Club, the New England Wild Flower Society, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service began a successful propagation program. They transplanted it off the trails, away from wandering hikers. In 2002, dwarf cinquefoil was determined recovered enough so that it was taken off the endangered species list.[1]

People's connection to the White Mountains moved them to advocate for a seemingly insignificant flower. What started small grew bigger than most could imagine. AMC researchers and USFS employees hiked to some the of tallest parts of New England, crawling over rocks on their hands and knees, to collect data on the plant. The AMC organized trail workers and volunteers to reroute major hiking trails out of the plant's chief habitats. The species was part of their place. And what seemed to be a single insignificant plant became a network of people, engaging with the land and with each other.

I am lucky. I have seen dwarf cinquefoil in bloom. In the summer of 2013, I lived and worked for three months at Greenleaf Hut, just 1.1 miles below the summit of Mount Lafayette—the northernmost peak on Franconia

1. Nancy G. Slack and Allison W. Bell, *AMC Field Guide to the New England Alpine Summits*, 2nd edition (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2006, pages 91–93).

Tiny dwarf cinquefoil leaves and flowers survive frigid alpine temperatures. UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Ridge. When the last snow melts from the summits in June, until the first snows of the new winter in October, visitors pay to stay in the huts—entertained and fed by the crew, or "croo" in hut parlance, of young people who live in the mountains.

On warm June days, my croo mate Abagael and I snuck up to the ridge on our afternoons off to see the small patch of dwarf cinquefoil that grows not far from the summit of Lafayette. Dressed in our finest hiking gear (tutus and head scarves from the hut's costume bin), we ducked left off the summit, feeling the breeze rustle the tulle around our waists. In front of us, the ridge opened up to the Pemigewasset Wilderness, and we saw the crooked tip of Galehead Mountain leaning into the clouds.

Those afternoons on the ridge reminded me of childhood summers in Sudbury, Massachusetts. After our baths, my brother and I tugged our pajamas over our heads and rushed outside to the rolling, green lawn. As we enjoyed the last hours of sunlight, dirt crept back under our fingernails and streaked our cheeks. Dad and Mom, with our baby sister asleep in her arms, sat on the stairs watching us run in circles.

Directly behind the house stood the swing set. A blue and red swing dangled below monkey bars, attached to a small hut. The complex was our time machine, our pirate ship, our spaceship, and sometimes just our tree house. No matter what game we played, our imagination cast a spell over the yard and the woods beyond. At age 5, I knew that piece of land better than my ABCs. I could walk the path in the woods in bare feet with my eyes closed, stepping carefully over oak roots. I knew exactly which tree you could peel a twig from and suck on like a lollipop because it tasted like root beer. I never twisted an ankle in the nearly invisible grassy ditch between the house and the swing set.

As I fell in love with the outdoors over the years, my feet carried me from evenings in the yard to the tops of the earth, and as I stood on that ridge with Abagael, looking out at the Pemigewasset Wilderness and Franconia Notch, I realized how privileged I was to walk among the dwarf cinquefoil in my new summertime backyard.

The writer and activist Rick Bass takes readers on a walk through his valley, the Yaak Valley, in *The Book of Yaak* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996). "Is it too much to imagine that the pulsings of our blood and our emotions follow the rough profile of the days of light in this valley? . . . the play of light in these strange forests and even the sound of its creeks, somehow a place and sound

that has almost always existed, which mirrors the sounds and rhythms inside us?" Bass highlights a poetic sense that directed many decades of nature writers who mapped their beloved places on the page. When I read Bass, I picture Franconia Notch. I drive north; the mountains pile up on either side; thick coats of yellow birch, mountain ash, fir, and red spruce rise on the steep granite faces. I feel the hot summer sun on my back. I smell bread baking in the hut kitchen. I watch my friends jump into the icy swimming hole off Cascade Brook Trail. I feel the breeze on the ridge rustle my tutu.

I remember the morning I hiked down the Old Bridle Path for the last time as a hut kid at Greenleaf—hesitant to give it up. It seemed so unfair to relinquish the ownership I felt over those few miles of rock and dirt. That trail was my way home, and it felt like home. But we *borrow* those mountains for the summer, we hut kids. We know that land better than most people in the world. Yet, as much as we claim or wish that it belonged to us, we leave it for others at the end of the season, when we return to the valley. On that last day, as the late August sun crept through the birch and ash on the last mile, I realized that responsibility, not ownership, is the true mark of belonging to a place. I knew that my responsibility would be to mapping my beloved places across the page, inspiring something greater.

The Old Bridle Path (OBP, to those in the know) runs 2.9 miles from the parking lot opposite Lafayette Place, off Route 93, to Greenleaf Hut. The path wanders toward Walker Ravine, then bears north onto Agony Ridge before climbing to the hut.

For decades, travelers rode OBP on horseback. Hotel owners Richard Taft and Charles Greenleaf commissioned the trail construction in 1852. It served as a horse trail for Profile House guests to a summit shelter on Mount Lafayette.[2]

As I fall asleep at night, I hike OBP up to Greenleaf Hut like I'm counting sheep. Every rock, root, and tree is tattooed in my memory. I close my eyes, and it's June again. I am packing up to the hut.

I stand at the base of the trail. Fifty-two pounds of lettuce, cucumbers, peppers, strawberries, and a foot-and-a-half-long shank of pork are stacked in

2. Built in 1853 by Richard Taft, the Profile House began as a "simple" three-and-a-half story building but grew into a small empire for wealthy urbanites. The hotel owned 6,000 acres of the surrounding mountains. After the addition of twenty cottages in 1868—where regular summer guests could spend their whole summer in private housing—the hotel could accommodate more than 500 guests.

Partway up the Old Bridle Path. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

boxes and strapped to my packboard with an old twine rope. The packboard looks like a medieval torture device. Depending on the day, "torture" is less of a description and more of a reality. The leather straps of the board dig into my shoulders, and sweat pools where the canvas covering the wood beams of the board pushes against my back. Torment.

As I enter the woods from the parking lot, the churn and tumble of rushing water echoes through the trees and fills my nose with beady vapor. Those first few steps into the shade of the canopy by the water calm my anticipation of the heavy hike ahead, a short-lived piece of heaven on a hot summer day. Beyond the stones, the cool sanctuary fades back into thick, humid air, and my breath deepens with every step. If I forget to duck a bit to the right, branches of hobblebush twist and shred between the hooks of my packboard.

Flat-topped clusters of snowy white flowers bloom along the thin hobblebush branches. Deceptive to the unknowing eye, the larger petals are only for show. They draw insects close enough to pollinate the smaller flowers inside of the clusters. Large, heart-shaped leaves dot the rest of the branches in pairs. These leaves budded in early spring, when slushy snow still caked the ground. Hobblebush withstands some of the colder temperatures in the northern boreal forests. Hobblebush leaves don't freeze until it's below freezing: about 23 degrees Fahrenheit. The drooping branches take root on the forest floor, adding to the shrub's bed-head look. By August, most of the leaves

on the trailside part of the shrub are gone. I partially blame myself; the large flat leaves make excellent backcountry toilet paper.

The trail winds on, gently sloping up, flat by White Mountain standards. I round a small bend where an old yellow birch guards the edge of the woods. Three feet from the dirt, its trunk splits in two, one end descending straight into the earth and the other arching through the air before rooting down, hugging an invisible boulder.

A few yards ahead, two birch logs rot on the left side of the trail. Beyond the birch logs, the real hike begins. Small stones grow into big boulders, exposed over the years from thousands of boots weathering the sandy dirt. My steps become quick and purposeful; building momentum is critical. One missed moment turns one-and-a-half hours of carefree hiking into the most heinous three hours of your life. Cold, salty water drips down my back from the pork shank. This is when I'm relieved I don't work in Wyoming or Alaska, because I would be one tasty grizzly bear snack.

I hoist the packboard up with my palms, gripping the ends of the wooden planks that hang down by my thighs. Air sweeps through the momentary gap, and I feel it cool my back, accentuating the soggy patch of sweat and pork drippings on my shirt. Suddenly a stream of freezing water tickles my smallest right toe and meanders down into the heel of my trail runners. Even after days of sweltering heat, this section of trail stays saturated. Small channels of water braid through the sandy dirt, collecting in pockets along the trail. I plough ahead, cursing at my wet socks.

Up ahead the trail widens, pressed completely flat for twelve feet. Two slender tree trunks flank the brief break. The earth rises back up fleetingly and then flattens again for the last time until the hut. I cruise through the trees. Yellow birch, ash, and pine fly by out of the corner of my eye. Every stride I take, my eyes stay transfixed at the dusty floor, careful not to trip on a rock or root. The canopy gaps above the trail, and sunlight pours through the rift. Dancing between the rocks, my feet thud down the trail, my packboard bouncing off my back. A small bead of sweat spills from my hairline, between my eyes, and down to the tip of my nose, where it hangs, waiting to bounce off with my next crashing step.

The sound of water rushes back into earshot, hurling down the mountain to where the trail begins. This section of the trail and I have some beef.

A few weeks earlier, I had hurdled down the trail with bags full of trash strapped to my packboard. We were rushing to meet the truck that took away our trash in return for the next few days' food and supplies. We were late.

(OK, I was late.) My feet skipped rapidly between rocks, carefully avoiding the patches of dirt where I was more likely to slide. My feet moved instinctively, picking up speed in the flatter sections and slowing down as I navigated over a steeper rock face. I rounded the corner where the water rushes into the valley. Gravity carried me down, down, down, when down into my hand plopped a pea, a carrot, and a piece of wet turkey. Then, cascading onto my thigh came a stream of turkey soup, lasagna, and coffee grounds. The sloppy food spattered into the dirt. I sat down on the dirt, scooped up the alphabet soup, tied up the trash bag, and cried.

Weeks of footprints and rainstorms have washed away any evidence of the spill, but I no longer stop to listen to the water as I pass. Up around the bend, two rocks lie across the trail. Some days I try to squeeze my foot between them, but the faster way is to hoist my weight up on the right rock with one leg and grab on to the tree trunk next to it with my left hand for balance.

I feel a sticky patch of sap peel off the bark onto my hand as I release my grip on the tree. It's a young ash, the bark still smooth to the touch. These hardwood trees tower above the trail, but a mile or so up they disappear, replaced by red spruce and fir. Only evergreens wrestle through the freezing temperatures and blasting winds of the cold winter months on the summits. They thrive on the highly acidic, nutrient-poor soils that coat the granite bedrock. Even so, these alpine survivors crawl through the high elevations, twisting and knotting low to the ground. Regular exposure to fierce, freezing winds stunts and deforms the trees. These sections of vegetation, known as krummholz, blanket the mountainsides higher up OBP. The word derives from German: *krumm* meaning "crooked, bent, and twisted," *holz* meaning "wood." Often trees known as "flag" or "banner" trees indicate the first signs of krummholz—their needled complexions completely worn off the windward side of the tree, where strong winds and rime ice abrade the branches.

The sap on my palm adheres my skin to the grips on my packboard. Every time the weight on my back shifts, I feel the wooden beam adjusting in my sticky, blistering hand.

Finally, I reach the stone staircase—the Stairway to Heaven. The sound of rushing water streams back into earshot. This spot is the last one where the trail veers close enough to the runoff to hear it, but I am still slightly less than halfway up OBP. One stair after another, I climb the steep, stone steps, pain searing through my calves. Around the corner, the trail flattens a bit until it reaches a three-to-four-foot-high boulder.

I prefer to do this part with no one watching. Without a packboard, the rock is easy to climb. Above the rock, a tree limb extends out just low enough for the top of the packboard to catch, sending me ricocheting backward on more than one occasion. It's also a rather large step for a 5-foot-6-inch-tall woman to leverage. I imagine I look like a baby giraffe, neck swinging to avoid decapitation, while scrawny legs wobble anxiously, begging to find a long enough moment of stability to hoist up—all together, a strikingly embarrassing sight.

I teeter for a moment on the edge of the rock, bracing myself for a somersault backward. Rocking a little, I stick the landing, but it's definitely time for a short break. Just ahead is my favorite "crump" rock. Crumping is the act of resting during a pack carry. To crump involves much more than simply sitting down. It is an art. There must be a rock, not too high, not too low, but just right for balancing the wooden beams of the packboard evenly to relieve aching shoulders. One wrong move, and the next thing you know, a group of bucket-hat-wearing tourists are hauling you up by the arms in a panicked chorus of, "Are you OK?"

The phrase dates back to the 1920s. According to one former hut croo member, it's a made-up word that combines "crumple" (as in, to crumple to the ground) and "crap" (because these rest stops were often where you relieved yourself—I say that in the past tense because I do not know anyone who has accomplished such an amazing feat in this decade).

Crump is both a verb and a noun. For instance, "I was so tired today, I crumped five times." Or, "My favorite crump is the boulder at the end of the third switchback." Old hutsmen and women respect the idiom so much that *Solvitur Crumpus* became the motto of the OH, the hut alumni organization that used to be called the Old Hutsmen Association. *Crumpus* is a fake Latin word for crump, but *solvitur* is the beginning of the obscure Latin quote, "Solvitur ambulando," which translates to, "It is solved by walking." The phrase originates from the fourth-century-BCE Greek philosopher Diogenes's response to the question of whether motion is real—he got up and walked. Substitute *crumpus,* and the motto becomes, "It is solved by crumping."

We pass down these tales and tidbits, both our own and those we've heard, and the OBP grows, extending beyond 2.9 miles of rock and dirt. It bridges gaps between generations of hut kids. The trail was our triumph

and, on some days, our failure. It gave us our fondest memories and our worst moments. It was the secrets we shared—a hidden trail, a favorite crump, a patch of dwarf cinquefoil in bloom—that kept us connected. We broke our backs. We callused our hands. We rolled our ankles. We wore through our shoes after just three months. Yet whether the views were alive with fiery mountain ash or blanketed by fog and thunder, we hiked.

Through their teen years, early twenties, and perhaps even beyond, many people barely pay attention to the ordinary routes of the day, like the trip from the local coffee shop to the office. If asked to recount a memory or a story, a reason that their space exists in a certain way, what it once was, or how it came to be, many might swear they will look it up. They might. Yet more often the sudden burst of intrigue fades and people go back to their routines. Those people never worked in the White Mountains.

Connecting to that trail, that land, a crump rock, the dwarf cinquefoil, the painful packs, and the final fall into the back door of the hut kitchen, we build not only a love of the White Mountains but also a community that sustains it. The beauty and memory of the OBP survives as long as we continue to share in the tradition of those 2.9 miles.

As you fall asleep tonight, try wandering Old Bridle Path, getting caught in a thunderstorm, or crumping at an awe-striking view. Find a place you know well and explore it. In the words of Diogenes, "Solvitur ambulando." If nowhere comes to mind then start walking.

Caroline Santinelli is a teacher and a storyteller living in Colorado. Her writing and video work has been featured in Outside Online and National Geographic Online. Her first story for *Appalachia* was "Timber Kings" (Summer/Fall 2014, 65, no. 2), about girls on the Franconia Ridge. While a student at Middlebury College, she worked in the AMC's hut system in the White Mountains.

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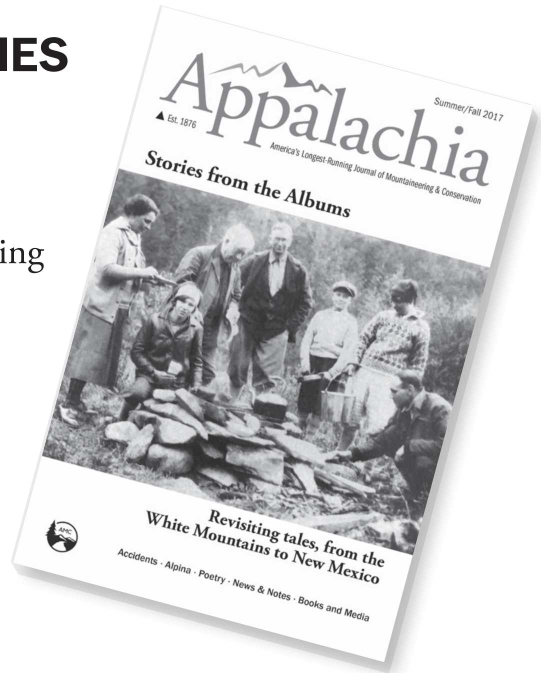

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