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Bob Proudman

An appreciation of a groundbreaking trails career

Rebecca Oreskes



IFIRST HEARD OF BOB PROUDMAN IN 1979, WHEN I STARTED WORKING for the Appalachian Mountain Club's huts in New Hampshire's White Mountains. I never heard his full name. I just kept hearing the word Bobe (pronounced "BOE-be") as they described some amazing rock climb or outlandish feat. The tone when they said "Bobe" mixed respect, bemusement, and affection. All I knew then was that he had something to do with the AMC trails. I pictured one of the super-strong, irrepressible, and slightly crazy AMC trail crew. I probably wasn't too far off, but Bob Proudman, who retired in 2015 from a distinguished career at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, was more than this.

Since he began working in 1965, Bob has helped almost every hiker who's ever walked in the White Mountains, on the Appalachian Trail, or on any trail, anywhere. His influence can be seen in how the trails are graded and placed, in the design of backcountry toilets, and in campsites. The 1960s and 1970s, when Bob began working on trails, was a time of exponential growth in crowds of hikers and backpackers. Their boots pounded the trails, and they cut plants and trees, left trash, and dug trenches at campsites. This led to innovations in trail building and backcountry management, many of which Proudman led.

According to a 1992 item by Paul Moore in this journal (49 no. 2), "instead of 'improving' the backcountry, the (trail) crew began to focus on protecting the resource itself." Proudman fostered the era of trail managers as conservationists.

Proudman was 16 in 1965, when he joined the AMC's paid summer trail crew. Three years later, he led the crew as trail master, a challenging job for a young man in charge of his peers. After a brief break in Colorado, he returned in 1971 to the AMC, which hired him to establish and build the Garfield Ridge Campsite, an enclave of tent platforms nestled on challenging inclines below Mount Garfield in the Whites. He worked as Garfield Ridge's first caretaker. After a stint as the AMC's acting trails supervisor, he became its first permanent trails supervisor, a position he held until 1981.

He also served the organization that manages the Appalachian Trail, serving on the then–Appalachian Trail Conference board of managers from 1974 to 1978. (Now called the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the ATC is the

Bob Proudman on a recent trip through the Bugaboos, in the Canadian Rockies. In describing this photo, Proudman says, "Note glacial moraine in background, and gray hair in foreground." SUZANNE BIRCHARD

volunteer organization with responsibility for managing the AT, which itself is officially a national park.) While still an AMC employee, Proudman took a job with the National Park Service in its office that oversaw the AT from 1979 through 1981. This would define his career.

The Appalachian Trail

In 1981, Proudman dedicated the rest of his working life to the Appalachian Trail. That year, he took the job of trail coordinator for the ATC. His job developed into that of trail management director and, by 2005, operations director for the ATC. He retired almost two years ago after 34 years. His career at the ATC started seventeen years before the task of protecting the AT lands would be complete. It concluded when the trail was fully protected by the federal government, and his methods of trail use were being tested by ever-growing numbers of hikers.

The AT stretches about 2,200 miles from Springer Mountain in Georgia to the northern Maine summit of Katahdin, in Baxter State Park. To share in responsibility for the AT is to care for an iconic long-distance hiking trail that serves many people and many purposes. It is traveled by thousands of day-hikers, adults, kids, dog walkers, section hikers, and thru-hikers (those who walk its entire distance in one go). The AT makes its way across terrain as varied as southern balds, the New Jersey Highlands, the rugged alpine areas of the White Mountains, and the deep woods of Maine. It's not easy to hike it from end to end, nor is it an easy job to be one of its stewards. It takes skill and loads of patience to juggle the needs of so many different people and to take care of the land through which the trail passes. Gentle, patient, and a good listener, Proudman has all the requisite skills and has made many lasting contributions. Besides caring for the treadway, he wrote or co-wrote several editions of the ATC's influential trail-building guide, *Appalachian Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance* (Appalachian Trail Conservancy, latest edition 2010), after already having written the first editions of the Appalachian Mountain Club's *Complete Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance*. He started ATC's boundary monitoring and maintenance program, and worked with hundreds of trail volunteers and government agencies.

The impact of the AT doesn't just stretch between Georgia and Maine. Many organizations and even other countries have sought out the ATC and Proudman's expertise in trail building, working with volunteers, and developing long-distance trails. Proudman has shared his expertise and insights far

from home with projects in China and the Succulent Karoo, the desert region of South Africa and Namibia.

Franconia Ridge

One place where the backcountry boom's increased use and damage to the land was painfully apparent was along New Hampshire's Franconia Ridge. Hikers were walking everywhere, roaming braided trails for lack of a clearly defined pathway. The result was increased damage to fragile alpine plants. Proudman told me that, after some heated discussions between the AMC and the U.S. Forest Service, the Forest Service grudgingly accepted AMC's proposal to build scree walls along the trail. Proudman pioneered the years-long effort of defining the treadway above treeline so that hikers would be channeled onto one path instead of spreading out over a wide area, trampling alpine plants. Some hikers were unhappy with what felt, to them, like confinement and loss of freedom. Laura and Guy Waterman, climbers and authors of several books on backcountry ethics, were among those who initially felt the work was heavy handed. They talked at length with Proudman about how to balance protecting the alpine zone while maintaining the idea of the "freedom of the hills," Laura Waterman recalled.

"The great thing about Bob was we could talk about how best to care for the Franconia Ridge," she said. "And he was absolutely right—he had to build the wall. But we were able to make it a little lower. Bob was definite on what he did and why he did it. But there were never any hard feelings on either side. We liked and respected him from the beginning and that didn't change."

Proudman, along with others from the Forest Service, the AMC, and elsewhere, ushered in a new era, a time when trails began to be looked at not in isolation but as part of a larger system to support hikers and protect the land from misuse. Better campsite design, trail hardening, and composting toilets in the backcountry all sprang from this movement.

Climbing

Besides being an expert in trails, Bob was a renowned climber in the 1960s. He was part of a wave of bold, young climbers who completed many first ascents in New England, such as his winter ascents on Cannon Mountain. Rick Wilcox, Bob's college roommate at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst and leader of the 1991 New England Everest Expedition, said,

“Bob almost wrecked my college career because we were out climbing every weekend. Between 1966 and 1969, we climbed as much rock as we could. Bob had many first ascents of rock and ice in the White Mountains.”

Known for his many accomplishments and successes on rock, Proudman is also linked to tragedy. A 1974 climbing trip he led to Katahdin ended disastrously when a January thaw quickly turned into a severe storm. One climber in the group died, and all of them suffered from severe frostbite. The accident received a lot of attention, not all of it favorable to Bob as trip leader. The AMC’s mountaineering committee wrote critically that the group should have had a radio with them to check the weather.

Looking back on the accident on Katahdin and his time as a climber, Bob noted with regret his youthful fearlessness. When pressed, he said, “I regret that my actions led to someone losing his life.” He quickly added, “But we were free spirits and back-to-the-landers. We didn’t consider taking a transistor radio on climbing trips.”

Laura Waterman concurred that radios were rare on climbing expeditions at that time. “I still remember the night of that storm. Guy and I were at our homestead in Vermont—a long way from Chimney Pond in Maine. There had been a January thaw and the temperature went from the 50s to well below zero in a very short time. That storm came in with lightning speed. But people forget about the context of the time. Guy and I never would have thought about taking a radio; all of us relied on our own knowledge to keep ourselves safe.”

After the Katahdin tragedy, Proudman found himself reliving an earlier accident. In August 1969 while on Longs Peak in Colorado, Proudman saved the life of a climber who had fallen 100 feet. Bob recalls blood dripping down on him and “blood going everywhere.” Proudman believes that the climber would have bled to death without help. He suffered flashbacks, seeing dripping blood when water dripped on him from an air conditioner. Soon after, Bob simply walked away from climbing.

He made the choice never to expose his two children to rock climbing. But ever the storyteller, Proudman couldn’t stop himself from talking about his climbing adventures on long family vacation drives. “Out of the blue, in 2011, my daughter Katie says, ‘Dad, take me rock climbing!’” he said. “I was totally flummoxed and flabbergasted!”

He did take her climbing, to Raven Rocks along the AT in Virginia, and Katie, who is now 30, has spent the last four years working for Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures in Thailand’s second largest city, Chiang Mai.

Bobe

Bob and I finally met several years after we'd both left the AMC, when our work responsibilities intersected on the Appalachian Trail. I worked for the U.S. Forest Service and Bob was with the ATC. Our work brought us to many meetings on how to manage the AT. We hammered out agreements between the government, the ATC, and the volunteers who all had an interest in the trail. Our meetings were mostly convivial, but they sometimes got tense as we quibbled over words and intentions. Through it all, Bob could be counted on for a smile, some humor, or just some much-needed perspective. Most of all, he always listened. He knew when action needed to be taken. He didn't waver from what he thought was right. But he always kept his sense of humor, his kindness, and his smile.

Only recently did I get an answer to the mystery of the nickname "Bobe." It turns out that in 1965, AMC trail master Alan S. Thorndike chose a pseudo-French variant of the name Bobby Watson, a character in Eugène Ionesco's iconic theater of the absurd play, *The Bald Soprano*. Of all the origins of nicknames in the mountains that I've heard over the years, that wasn't one I expected. Bob told me he doesn't know why Alan chose to give him that name. The name didn't stick once Bob left the AMC—today only his former AMC colleagues call him *Bobe*.

Climber, trail builder, backcountry manager, coalition-builder, conservationist: Bob Proudman has had many faces. He's done every job with thoughtfulness and caring for both people and the land. Anyone who hikes or cares about trails should be thankful that he has devoted so much of his life to trails and backcountry management. And don't let the word "retirement" fool anybody. I know Proudman will be consulting whenever and wherever he's asked. He'll happily tell you stories of adventures near and far. As he said in a departing piece for *Appalachian Trail Journeys*, quoting John Muir, "The mountains are calling and I must go."

All of us should feel grateful that Proudman first answered that call many years ago.

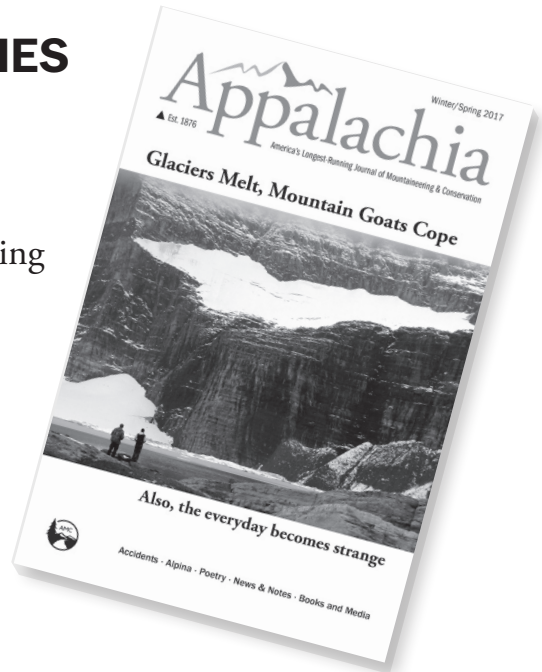
REBECCA ORESKES, a member of the *Appalachia* Committee, is a writer, former Appalachian Mountain Club hut staffer, and retired forest ranger with the White Mountain National Forest. She has written many pieces for this journal, most notably her series with Doug Mayer, "Mountain Voices," which became a book of the same name (AMC Books, 2012).

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