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## Mountain Voices: Ben English, Jr.: Quiet and Unassuming, His Reach in the White Mountains is Far and Wide

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*Mountain Voices*

## **Ben English, Jr.**

*Quiet and unassuming, his reach in the  
White Mountains is far and wide*

**Doug Mayer and Rebecca Oreskes**



A LOW-KEY AND UNASSUMING FIGURE, BEN ENGLISH IS NOT widely known outside of a small circle of mountain friends. His contributions to the White Mountains, though, have reached many thousands of people over many generations. They span his days working on trails, his current support of the Appalachian Mountain Club professional White Mountain trail crew, work coediting two books, *Our Mountain Trips: Part I, 1899 to 1908* and *Our Mountain Trips: Part II, 1909 to 1926* (Bondcliff Books, 2005), and his photography—his railroad photographs appear in the book *Trackside Around New Hampshire With Ben English, Jr., 1950–1970* (Morning Sun Books, 2009). A third generation AMC member, Ben joined the club when he was 12. He has served on five of the committees that edited and revised the AMC’s revered *White Mountain Guide*.

Married to Judy, father of two children, and a retired schoolteacher, Ben says, “I don’t mind being not known.” The mountains have been part of Ben’s life since childhood when he read his grandparents’ journals detailing their adventures in the White Mountains, bird watching with his grandmother, staying in the huts and later as a member of the AMC trail crew. (*Editor’s note: A review of those journals, compiled as Our Mountain Trips, appears on page 149.*) He continues to be involved with the trail crew. He visits them in the woods, shares stories, and invites them to his house. He says, “The trail crew has probably shaped or created a whole life for me. I still hang around with them, and they come here and visit. . . . It’s very meaningful.”

In a world where so many of us multitask and pay only casual attention, Ben listens, observes, and pays close attention, especially to our mountain world. “On January 1, 1960, I started one of those five-year diaries,” he says. “I write four lines a day, and I’ve done it faithfully ever since. I’ve missed about ten days in 50 years.”

We spoke with Ben English at the cozy, simple home his parents built in Jackson, New Hampshire. The view from his dining room ranges from Carter Dome, to the northern Presidentials, to Mount Monroe, the Gulf of Slides, and Mount Isolation. He loves the view, but he loves being out in the mountains with the trail crew even more.

What follows is in his own words.

*Ben English examining an ax used by today's Appalachian Mountain Club Trail Crew in an equipment shed at the club's Pinkham Notch facility. New Hampshire.*

NED THERRIEN

## **Coming to Jackson, New Hampshire**

My mother and father met here in Jackson, in the mid '30s. Both their colleges happened to have ski weekends at Moody's, now Whitney's Inn [at the base of Black Mountain in Jackson]. My mother's car got stuck in the snow and the boys went over to help. That's how they met.

After World War II, we started coming up to Christmas Farm Inn in Jackson as a family, for vacations and on weekends. Around '50, my parents decided we were spending a lot of money at the inn. It was great, but they figured we should look around for a chunk of land. So, they came in here with a real estate agent. There were two acres here for sale. My father and mother came in December '51, on snowshoes and looked at Mount Washington and said, "That's it! We'd like to buy this." The original part of the house was a 30-by-15 woodshed that had been across the road from us, down in Topsfield, Massachusetts. My father and another guy numbered all the timbers, and they put it on a truck and brought it up here in the summer of '52. Now we had a camp.

I went to Topsfield High School for two years. I didn't study worth a diddly, but I got A's. My parents knew I was coasting. They said, "Boy, you're going to have to go to school somewhere else. We're going to have to pay to educate you." So, I went to Mount Hermon School for two years. I wasn't smart enough to get into Bates or Bowdoin or UNH or all those places, so I went to Nasson College down in Springvale, Maine. It was a great place.

## **Signing up for AMC Trail Crew**

In August of '55, my parents and I were at Madison Hut. Back in those days, the guests helped with dishes after the meal. We'd wash and wipe and put the dishes away, even though I'm sure we didn't put them in the right places, but the hut crew appreciated the help.

Well, I am a pretty quiet guy. I'm a low-profile person. So I went out in the kitchen and probably put away three or four dishes. There was a tall, skinny guy who was clearly not part of the hut crew. He and the hut crew were talking, and I tuned into words like "tent," "cooking over fire," "ax," "trails," and "sleeping out." And those words, they rang a big bell with me. So, after they got done talking, I went over to this guy; I looked up at him. I said, "I like the sound of what I heard." He told me that they were talking about the AMC trail crew. He said, "If you're interested, write in and get an application,"

which I did. His name was David Hayes. Stretch Hayes. He was the AMC trail master in 1955.

So, I filled out the application that fall, and later in the winter I got a letter from Joel Nichols who lived in West Newbury, Massachusetts. I still have the letter. It said, "My name is Joel Nichols. You don't know me from Adam. I'm going to be your boss this summer. Don't let that scare you. I put my pants on one leg at a time just like everybody else. Some people say I resemble the Old Man of the Mountain so I'm also known as the Great Stone Face." His profile and his chin stuck out. He's a cool guy.

That was in March of '56. I was 16 years old. I was on the trail crew the summers of '56, '57, and part of '58.

### **Hutton Lodge**

Those were the days when AMC had a house in Whitefield, New Hampshire, right in the village up on the hill. The house was Hutton Lodge, named for Jack Hutton. He was on trail crew and trail master in the late '30s. He was a highly respected trail master—and not just trail stuff, either. He was just all-around respected. Then he went in the Marines, and got killed on Iwo Jima. So they named the house Hutton Lodge.

When the AMC trail crew started in 1919, they looked at Whitefield for a base, because it's to the north of three notches. You can run down to Franconia or Crawford [notches], just go over to Gorham and come down to Pinkham, and go a little further east and come down south to Evans. You can also get over to Kinsman Notch.

For the first decade, the crew used the trains to get around. The Profile and Franconia Notch Railroad ran up to the Profile House from Bethlehem Junction. The Maine Central came down from Crawford. There were plenty of passenger trains. You know, Portland to Saint J [St. Johnsbury, Vermont]. Pinkham was a little more difficult to get to, but they'd take a train to Gorham from Whitefield.

### **AMC Trail Crew in the 1950s**

We went into the woods on Saturday morning, came out Thursday afternoon; we were in Whitefield Thursday night, Friday, Friday night and back into the

woods on Saturday morning. There were nine people on the crew back then. There were eleven my second year, and I think there were eleven in '58.

The AMC hired a woman from Littleton to come in and cook for us. Mrs. Chamberlain was one wicked cook. Geez, was she good! We'd work a half a day on Thursday, then run down the trail, get out of the woods, get in the Jeep and drive back to Whitefield. She always had steaming biscuits waiting for us, whether it was 3 o'clock or 5 o'clock. They were slathered with real butter. We'd eat probably four or five big biscuits as soon as we'd get in the door. Then, we'd take a shower. We'd put on a clean T-shirts and clean pants. Mrs. Chamberlain always had a big supper for us. We had a dining room, and we ate at a table with the trail master at the head. The upper-years were along the sides and the first-years were way down at the end.

After supper, we'd take our laundry over to the Whitefield Steam Laundry. Then some of us would go out. There was Chase Barn Playhouse right there in Whitefield. We'd get dressed up. We'd put a jacket on. There were girls there, the usherettes. Some of us would go to the movies. There were drive-in theaters in Littleton and Twin Mountain. And of course, we always had to grease our boots and sharpen our axes. On Friday, we'd do chores, get the laundry, and get food all lined up for the next week.

We had three vehicles. A '47 Jeep (a real Jeep—the window flopped down on the hood), a '51 Willys pickup truck with wooden bows in the back with canvas over it, and a '49 Chevy wagon. We'd take these vehicles down two or three times a summer to Ken Jordan who ran the Gulf station in town. He'd say, "What do you boys do with these vehicles?! I get them all fixed up for you and you come in here five or six days later, the exhaust systems have been torn out and the brakes are all worn!"

We didn't abuse them, though, but we did use them. In '56, we had to go into Desolation Shelter with a big load. The Signal Ridge Trail was a whole heck of a lot better than it is now. We said, "Why are we going to walk seven miles dragging all this crap on our back? We've got this versatile Jeep!" We thought we'd drive up there and see how far we could go. I didn't think we could get all the way to Desolation Shelter but, I thought, we ought to be able to knock off a couple of miles. And so we did, but it was a little hairy. We got as far as the junction of Carrigain Notch Trail and Signal Ridge Tail and the Carrigain Brook crossing. *[Editor's note: a distance of 1.7 miles.]* We couldn't get across, so we unloaded all the stuff and tied it onto our pack boards.

It probably took us longer to drive to that junction than it would have if we had packed.

### Moses

Everyone on trail crew had woods names. Mine was Moses. I started trail crew late my first year. My parents drove me up to Whitefield. Alan McLean was there and he said, "I'm a first-year also. Everybody else is in the woods. We're late." There was a note from trail master Joel Nichols. It said, "There is food in the refrigerator, make yourself at home, go upstairs, find a bunk and I'll see you tomorrow morning." That's all it was.

So the next morning Joel showed up and he showed us—sort of—how to put food and things in boxes. And he said, "Get in the Jeep. We're going to go to the Mahoosucs." I had no idea what he was talking about. The Success Pond Road at that time was just a one-track road. It was for logging trucks and there were pull-offs every now and then. No bridges. No culverts. You had to ford every bit of water. We used the Jeep or the '51 Willys truck. We drove up that road in low gear for an ungodly long time. [*The distance was 8.1 miles —Editor.*] We were headed to Carlo Col Shelter.

We got out at the Carlo Col Trail and Joel showed us a pack board and gave us a clothesline to tie the boxes on. I remember seeing Joel lash two boxes quickly to his pack board, put it on his back, and then he was gone. And here Alan and I are, numb, naïve, green, and thinking, "Geez, how did he do that?" Well, we figured it out, and we got our boxes on and Alan went off a little ahead of me.

My legs are short, so I cannot walk as fast. I mean, I think I'm going fast, but I'm not. Well, anyway, I was behind. Now, it's only 2.4 miles up to Carlo Col Shelter. I didn't see Alan and I didn't see Joel, but I figured, I'd packed before. I wasn't scared or anything. I just went along and figured I'll get there eventually. I had all day. It was probably 9 A.M. Well, by the time I got up there, it was probably 2 P.M. Alan was already there. And Joel said, "Where have you been?" He said it politely. I mean, he didn't make me feel like a mole or a worm or anything, but he did emphasize, "Where have you been?" I said, "I don't know. I was just coming along." I felt all right. Nothing hurt. I was tired. And he said, "Moses spent 40 days in the wilderness, didn't he? You're Moses." So I was Moses.

I think I know the reason I was so slow. I noticed that Joel had two boxes. He had his personal box, which included his sleeping bag and wool shirt and





*One of the few snapshots of 1957 AMC trail crew members carrying their full loads shows (left to right) English, Warren Lightfoot, Stephen Waite, and Tom Lisco, getting ready to leave Zealand Falls Hut for the Guyot Shelter.* COURTESY OF BEN ENGLISH, JR.

toothbrush, and he probably had the pot kit which is very light. And Alan had his personal box and a box of food. We all had our axes and clippers. But old English here, he had his personal box, probably a food box, and he also had a case of oranges.

*[Later Nichols gave an explanation for the oranges.]* Nichols said, “I’m going to find out about this English guy and see if he can work and earn his way.” I just figured everybody takes a case of oranges or something. So we get up there, and how many are there, 25 or 30 oranges in a case, and there were the three of us for two days. I think we ate a lot of oranges, and we might have heaved a lot of them into the woods, too. I spoke to him about that oh, three or four years ago in Vermont, and he just smiled.

### **Life on Trail Crew**

We started the season with patrolling—clearing out winter brush, trees, and branches with an ax. Patrolling was great. We covered a lot of miles. We saw a lot of country like the Mahoosucs. After the patrolling was done, we standardized, which means cutting brush and branches so the trail was six feet wide and eight feet high; so you could go through it without a pack hitting branches.

A lot of folks think that standardizing is dull and boring and all, but I didn’t find it to be that. It was like mowing the lawn. You know, mowing the



lawn may be dull, but it isn't to me because I like to walk, and I can also see what I've accomplished. After standardizing a section, I'd turn around and look and think, "Wow, nice corridor!"

Well, the AMC had, we estimated, 365 miles of trail to maintain in the White Mountains. We patrolled everything, every year. Our goal was to standardize one-third of that, 100 miles, each summer.

We also built and maintained the shelters. That was fun. And we were responsible for signs. There were 700 AMC trail signs. And on patrol, we'd make note, just like they do now, of any signs that were missing or broken. If there was a bridge or a shelter that needed to be rebuilt, we did it. Usually a bridge was just two logs, two stringers.

In '57, the trail crew built Ethan Pond Shelter. Bob Scott and I—it was my second year, he must have been a third-year—we were sent in with a mess of food and axes, and I guess we had a tent. We were told to cut all the trees we could find, and peel them and stack them in a week. So we did. We cut, limbed them, and we peeled bark off enough trees to build that shelter.

We had pitch in our sleeping bag, on our sleeping bag, in us. My glasses had pitch on them, in them. You even tasted pitch. I'm not complaining. Even then, I don't think we complained. It was just a result of being in there. You couldn't get pitch off your hands. Before you picked up anything, you had to rub your hand in the dirt so your hands wouldn't be so sticky. That was wicked fun. The shelter was dedicated on August 21, 1957.

### **Tools and Machete Fights**

The first-years used single-bit axes. Second-years and up got double-bit axes and machetes. I still have my machete. They would do some damage! You could take down a small tree if you grabbed it maybe five feet up and you bend it, put as much tension as you can, and then you slash down at the bottom.

Another thing that was cool about machetes: We had machete fights. You and I would each have a machete, and we'd turn it so that the backside was out; then we'd crash those machetes, "Bang, bang!" The goofers—oh, my God, they didn't know that it's the backside that we're hitting. It's not the sharp side. We wouldn't do that to a tool. My machete has three or four dozen dents or nicks in the back from where the other guy would slash against it. It was a cool sound. You know, steel ringing on steel.

A lot of people thought—and still think—that the trails take care of themselves. Once, we decided we're going to make it so the goofers realize that trails don't take care of themselves. It was on the Ethan Pond Trail. We came to a very thick part of alders. Well, we made the trail a little extra wide, like maybe it was eight feet wide and maybe eight feet tall. It was a clear, beautiful, and wide trail. And then all of a sudden there was this wall of alders, and we left it vertical. We hoped people would say, "My God, maybe we're not on the right trail. Maybe it doesn't go any further!"

### **Moses the Donkey Killer**

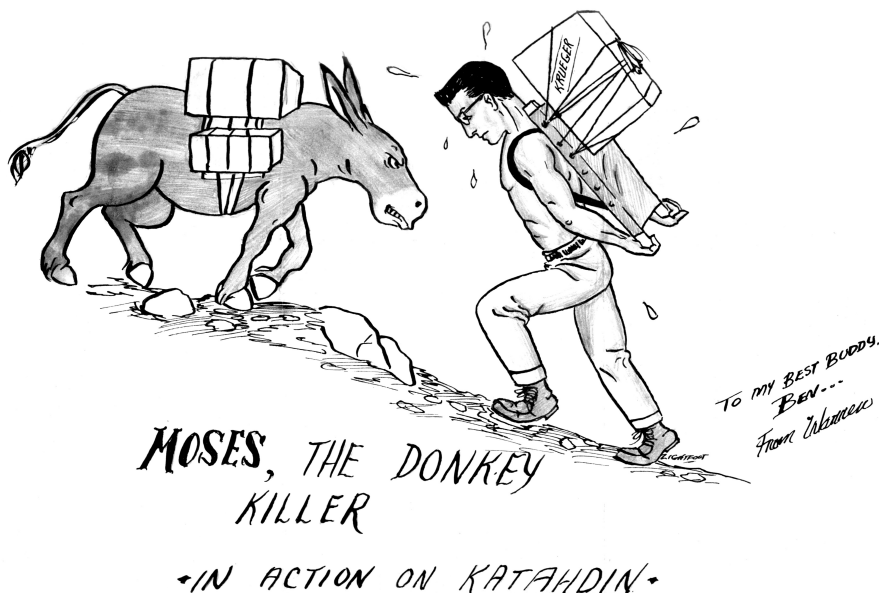
Later my first season, I got a little something added to my woods name. The AMC had twelve miles of trail over on Katahdin. And every year, for one week, three guys would go over and patrol. We'd get in the Jeep and drive for six or eight hours to Roaring Brook Campground and spend the night there.

The next day, we'd hike into Russell Pond. There was a cabin in there, a real cabin with doors and windows. It was for the ranger, but we could stay in it.

The trail was an old tote road and it was pretty level. At the end of the week, on the way out, I remember I was in the lead and was leaning forward. When you come out of the woods you're in a hurry and you just want to get out to civilization. You lean forward, you're holding the bottom of your pack board on your hands to lift it up or steady it. Your eyes are down and you're looking where your feet are going.

Warren Lightfoot was right tight on my butt, and Joel was right tight on Warren's ass, right behind him. There were three of us just as tight as we could go. I mean, we were booking it.

I looked ahead on one of those straight stretches, and I saw a donkey coming toward us, packing in supplies for the ranger at Russell Pond. There were a couple of donkeys with a muleskinner. We just kept right on truckin'. I glanced up again and we were closer, and they were still on the trail. I figured the muleskinner is going to have the donkeys stop for humans. Maybe I took the wrong assumption. We got close enough, and Warren and Joel, they saw what was going on. We got even closer and I figured, I guess I'm going to have to be the one to make a move. It was pretty close. So I stepped aside. And Warren and Joel, they both stepped aside. And the donkeys swept past us. And the muleskinner, he didn't say anything, he just probably nodded or



*In August 1956, English, who was known as Moses because he hiked slowly, encountered a donkey on the trail. The incident—immortalized in this cartoon by trail crew member Warren Lightfoot—gave him a longer nickname. WARREN LIGHTFOOT/COURTESY OF BEN ENGLISH, JR.*

something. And then they just kept on going. At that point, Warren thought that was the funniest thing. He fell over laughing. He grabbed his gut, and he just laughed and laughed. He was howling. Joel was, too. And he said, “Moses, I thought you were just going to run right into them.” And Joel says, “Moses the Donkey Killer!”

### **Trail Crew Changes**

The trail crew first-years got \$15 a week. The second-years got \$20, and the third-years made \$25. The trail master got \$45, I think. And, of course, we got all our food, our tools, and AMC paid for the laundry.

Working for the AMC, you’re paid in great spirits and fun and accomplishment, but your wallet doesn’t get fat. So eventually, after my third year, my parents and I figured I guess I better get a “real” job. I didn’t want to be trail master, really. But being a second-year and a third-year was kind of cool, because you knew the ropes. You knew where the trails were and you knew how to get to Dream Lake or the Reel Brook Trail without having to be told. And you didn’t need a map.

Things have changed over the years. The trail crew members these days, they're more worldly. I certainly wasn't. I mean these guys after their first year, maybe the next winter they've got an internship with the Micmac Indians on Cape Breton, and then the next year from where they're in college they're going over to India to help build trails or something. That was not me.

One of the big changes is having women on the crew; I mean, it's natural. We all live together. When you're on trail crew, you certainly have to be a definite makeup. They say you have to be able to live for five days in the woods close to each other's butts. If you can't do it, then you're not cut out for it. That eliminates 90 percent of the world.

And you stay in tents away from shelters, away from people. There weren't so many people in the woods when I was on crew. We stayed in shelters practically all the time. If we were working out on Franconia Ridge, we'd stay at Liberty Spring Shelter. The mountains are a lot busier now.

Not having a campfire is a big part that's different. You know, they used to say that campfire was the caveman's television. It's so neat to sit around a campfire. We used to cook on a fire for breakfast and supper. And it wasn't [called] dinner! It was supper. On trail crew, first-years got the firewood, started the fire, kept it going, and the upper-years did the cooking. And then, the first-years did the dishes. We built a fire at any shelter. The next thing we'd do is get a pot, get water in it, and boil it. You kept it going while you were cooking and eating, and then the hot water was there for the dishes.

If it was rainy, and it was going to be raining the next day and hard to get the fire going, well, you'd get wood on your way to the shelter. You get your wood, keep it in your pack, and keep it in your sleeping bag, to keep it dry. If you were a first-year, you had to get the fire going and keep it going. I still like campfires. I've got a fireplace built against the boulder, outside here. I just go down there and sit. Maybe sit and read. Maybe just lie down. It's cool to do that.

Now they use stoves, and we can't have fires. I couldn't be without a campfire. But the crews now—the trail crew doesn't miss it. They don't miss it because they didn't have it. Stoves, women, campfires, and staying in tents—those are all changes. But I don't think the type of person on trail crew has really changed. When trail crew alumni from the '50s and '60s and '70s come back, they say to the current crew, "You know, it's so great. Your names have changed, but it's so great to see that the feeling and the tradition and the excitement and the energy, the intensity of it, and the whole scene is the same as it was."

After I left trail crew, I worked at Camp Asquam, a girls' camp down on Squam Lake. I was the hiking counselor. That was pretty cool. I did two summers there, and then in '61, I worked at Christmas Farm Inn doing grounds. I didn't go back to visit trail crew much until the mid-'60s.

I guess at some point I realized that this trail crew thing had really made an impression on me. So, I began to drift back and visit Hutton or go into the trail crew cabin, which was built in '76. By the time I had gotten back, women had already come in. I wasn't an immediate observer of women joining, but I think it's great now. I mean, I don't know how it would have been in the '50s to have women on trail crew. Probably, they wouldn't want to have them on the crew just because of the formality of the expectations that boys and girls didn't go out to the woods together.

### **Becoming a Teacher**

When it came time to figure out a career, I wanted to be a forest ranger or conservation officer or do something outdoors. I was told after my aptitude test that I wouldn't do very well in math, and that I would need a lot of math to be a forest ranger, which is a bunch of bunk.

So that was the street I was headed down, and all of a sudden, it was like that big wall of alders on the Ethan Pond Trail. That's the end of forestry for me. I didn't know what the hell I wanted to do in college. Business? I hated it. And I hated numbers. I'm still not good in math. Somebody said, "Well, why don't you take education courses?" So I did.

After college, I started teaching right away in Campton, New Hampshire. I've always taught seventh- and eighth-grade English and history. Every now and then, I'd have a sixth-grade class, and every now and then, I'd have a ninth-grade class. I was two years in Campton, and I ended up liking teaching. I taught for another 32 years, the last 20 being in Bartlett, New Hampshire. *[Editor's note: English also taught at public and private schools in Newbury, Massachusetts; Canaan, New Hampshire; and Concord, New Hampshire.]*

### **Railroads**

My interest in trains started when I was probably 2, 3, or 4 years old, when my mother and father used to drive me around Eastern Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire. Where we lived, all the bridges had signs that read

“Boston and Maine Railroad.” My mother would say, “There’s a bridge coming.” I would get excited and say, “Boston and Maine Railroad!”

When I was in Whitefield with the trail crew, the B&M and the Maine Central were both there. There was passenger service on both railroads, plus freight trains. Driving through Crawford Notch, we’d see trains. Working on Webster Cliff, we’d look down and see those trains going through the notch.

My roommate in college was George McEvoy, and he liked transportation. We hung around the local railroad yard, maybe an hour here and an hour or two there. They liked us down there. We’d look at the trains, look at the cars. Before long they said, “You want a ride?” We’d move around the yard when they were shifting cars around. We’d get rides when they delivered coal to the woolen mill steam plant down in Sanford. Another day they asked, “You want a ride to Portland?” Well, we’d make sandwiches and go along. Once a month we’d ride.

I took pictures of railroad buildings and stations and bridges and section houses and things, as well as trains. I’ve always been interested in structures. I have a little shanty that used to be up at Crawford’s. The railroad moved it down to Glen, and then they didn’t use it anymore. I bought it for \$5, and brought it up here. And so I have a railroad building out back. (But that’s nothing compared to Ray Evans who had seventeen buildings! Ray and I got along very well. We were good friends. I couldn’t keep up with him on the trail, even though he was 30 years older than me.) *[Editor’s note: Ray Evans grew up along the railroad tracks in Crawford Notch and went on to be a lifelong lover of railroads and the White Mountains and a friend to many hut and trail crews.]*

I was in the Pemi in ’56, ’57, ’58. Working in the Pemi on trail crew was pretty cool. There was a great connection between logging railroads, the mountains, and the trails. Just what I love. I admired the Number 17 [railroad] trestle every time I hiked past it. Eventually, I decided to hike to the trestle for the express purpose of photographing it. That day was August 14, 1960. When I arrived, I was dismayed to see that it had been washed out in the flood of October 1959, when the slides had come down in Franconia Notch, every notch was closed, and the Kanc [Kancamagus Highway] was washed out. After I had started teaching in Campton in 1962, one of the guys who worked at Rand’s Hardware Store in Plymouth, Francis Boyle, gave me a couple of his photographs of the trestle after it had been abandoned. The track was on the top. They call them upside-down bridges.



## Mountain History

No matter where you go in the White Mountains, it's been logged. I like knowing what was here before. For example, the Wilderness Trail coming out of the Pemi. People will say they went up Bondcliff and then they had that five-mile slog coming out. But I say, "Wow, this is a neat culvert," or, "I wonder does that brook have a name, or is this evidence of something over there?" I do the same thing on the Rocky Branch Trail. I like going up to Shelter Number 1 and back. I might even do it this afternoon. But, I look every time. I go, "Oh, yeah, over there on that rock, there's a drill hole." Or, I know there's a benchmark up there on that rock. Even though I've seen it a hundred times, I look forward to it. I look for landmarks along the trail.

There's an arrow sign on a tree on the Rocky Branch Trail, for example. But if you look straight ahead, it's all trees and raspberries. Why do we have to have an arrow there? Well, the arrow's been there since the time that was a log landing, back in the '70s or something. If people saw it, they might have been tempted to go straight. Well, the arrow disintegrated and, a couple years ago, the Forest Service put up a new arrow. It doesn't need to be there, but there has been an arrow there and so now there's a new arrow! So if I find an arrow or a pile of brush for a detour, I ask myself, "Why, what was that?"

## Mountain Books

My mother's mother and father, Ida Rachel James and Walter James, they tramped around the mountains between 1899 and 1926. They lived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Waltham, Massachusetts. They came up probably three times a season, originally by horse and buggy and later by train. They went to Sandwich and Chocorua, because that wasn't too far from Portsmouth. Later, by train, they went to West Ossipee, Madison, North Conway, and Bemis—later called Notchland—in Crawford Notch, so they could get to the Davis Path, which was one of their favorite places. They began to come to the White Mountains by automobile in 1918, after they purchased their first car. They could come further in the same period of time that it took to come by horse and carriage or by train.

They took copious notes. Then, when they got back to civilization, they wrote their notes into stories. My grandfather also had a camera. He started with plate glass negatives and then film negatives, and developed his own photographs. They made journals with the stories plus his photographs. If

you asked me what inspired me to write and take pictures and be interested in the mountains, I'd say it's because of them.

One day, I was talking with Mike Dickerman from Bondcliff Books in Littleton [New Hampshire]. Mike knew that I liked mountain literature and photographs. I told him about the journals that we had, and he said, "Well, bring one over." So I took one of my grandparents' journals over and showed it to him. I thought it was worth pursuing. And Mike confirmed that immediately. He basically said, "Let's stop all the work that I'm doing now and get these into print." Up until that time, those journals were passed through the family without much thought. They just migrated from house to house, from bookcase to bookcase.

My sister Jane did all the digital restoration of the photography. She made them printable. My wife, Judy, retyped the earlier stories, which were handwritten. Later, my grandparents used a typewriter. The results were the *Our Mountain Trips* books. I certainly learned a lot about my grandparents. I mean, not only where they went, but how they thought. They were very sharp, educated writers.

I remember going places when I was on trail crew in the '50s that my grandparents had hiked or tramped back in the early 1900s, like Shoal Pond or Carter Notch. They'd perk up and we'd have a brief discussion about the changes that had taken place in the intervening years.

## Changes

My grandparents spent some time just loafing. We don't do that these days. Life was slower, then. We don't relax at home, and I don't know if people even loaf any more at the huts. Geez, these days, we have to be at the parking lot at such-and-such a time.

It's not just in the mountains. It's society. Sometimes I have to be somewhere for something, I'm always thinking, "Crap, I gotta leave now, so hurry along." I can't take time to look at a bird's nest. People get up on the top of Carter Dome, and they'll even say, "I ate three handfuls of gorp and then I left."

Maybe they don't know any better. Maybe they don't have the where-withal to comprehend that if they stay here for an hour and a half, they might see something, or the weather might change, or somebody nice might come by. They have to hurry down. Oh, and they set their stopwatch—and I don't

mean trail runners. I mean, you know, regular goofers. “Oh, I made it down in an hour and 14 minutes!”

Maybe they think the thing to do is to get up there as fast as they can and get on their cell phone and call, “Hey, I’m up here now!” I sound like I’m cynical, don’t I? But maybe that’s what they want to do, too. I guess what’s lost is the slowness and the feeling of just standing up there, putting your foot on a rock and looking down from Carter at the Wild River Wilderness. Think about what used to be down there in logging days, the fire in 1903, all this stuff.

Vibram soles are another change. Vibram soles just destroy trails. It’s like tenderizing meat with those hammers with all the bumps on them. It softens the trail and then it rains like it did yesterday and the trail goes down the hill. There’s more trail wear, for sure.

And Justice Douglas’s article about the huts. That brought in so many more people. *[Editor’s note: A National Geographic article in 1961 highlighted Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas’s trip through the AMC huts. Many people credited it with increasing interest in—and use of—the hut system.]* And then came the interstate highway system and lightweight equipment. People can just put a tent on their back and go.

### **Visiting the Crew**

I hike in as often as I can to see the trail crew—on a good day; I do not like sticky, muggy weather. I’ll just go into the woods, visit, eat lunch. They thank me just for showing up.

When I go visit the crew, I often go in by myself. Sometimes I take in a cantaloupe with me. I have my machete from the trail crew days with me. They know that when they see the machete sticking out of Moses’s pack, there must be something inside the pack and it’s not ice cream.

I tell them, I don’t come in to inspect your work. I want you to be proud of your work. Show me your work. Explain to me what you’re doing. And they do. They’ll say, “Oh, these rocks were over here and I set this here. You can’t see that rock underneath. That’s the base rock. If you dig down about four inches. . . .” and they’ll dig down. There it is, right there. They’re wicked proud of their work and they show it to me with that sense of pride.

Two summers ago, I had a stomachache. It wouldn’t go away. I went down to the hospital, and after a bunch of tests they said, “We’ll make you feel

better. We're going to take your appendix out!" That was Sunday night. On Tuesday afternoon, I came home. They told me that I couldn't hike for six weeks. I said, "That is not an option."

I was out here mowing the lawn, and a truck drove in the driveway. I recognized the two trail crew. They said, "Hey, man, how are ya? We just drove down to the hospital and they said you went home. We brought you something." They brought this huge wood chip from an ax cut. It said, "Get Well Ben" and all of them signed it. Junior, who was trail master last year, told them on their Kinsman patrol, "Whoever chops the biggest chip, that's going to be for Ben." That's an example of the relationship.

Then, Junior got hurt later in the summer. He ended up down at Memorial Hospital. Whenever anybody is in the hospital, I'll go visit them. Well, I had a chip. I wrote, "Junior, get well soon. Moses" and then the date. I took it in to him in his hospital room. Geez, he just about cried, you know. It was cool. Wicked. I'm telling you all this because that represents the feeling of the relationship.

Trail crew has probably shaped or created a whole life for me. My association with the current trail crew each year—the relationship that I have with them, that we have together—is unbelievable. I still hang around with them, and they come here and visit. Every New Year's for the last ten years, we'll have a brunch for whoever shows up. Judy and I get a mess of food, and some of them bring food. Some of them lie on the floor, some play cribbage, and some sleep beside the stove. Some of them go outside with their skis or sleds or snowboards. Others just sit around. It's very meaningful. And when I go into the woods now to visit, they say, "Oh, it's so awesome to have you come in and just talk with us, or just sit and watch."

What's special is the connection between the present and the past. It's the connection between young people and old people. An old man, in this case. It's the continuation of the camaraderie and the tightness and the love for each other.

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DOUG MAYER lives in Randolph, New Hampshire. In addition to his work as a producer for the radio program "Car Talk" and his mountain life, he contributes often to this journal. REBECCA ORESKES of Milan, New Hampshire, writes for this and other publications when not working for the White Mountain National Forest.

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*"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."*—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

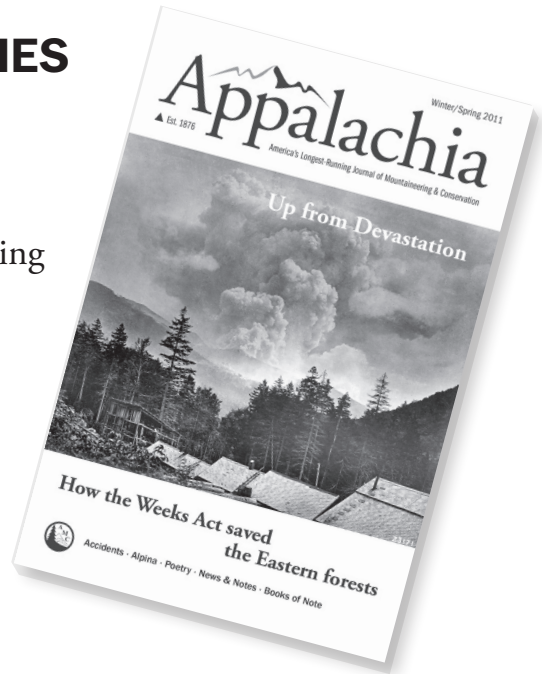
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