

# Interview of Laura Waterman

Interviewed By: Andrew Nelson

Present: Ashley Macmillan

Location: East Corinth, VT, 05040

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Attached: Additional Letter from Laura Waterman post interview.

**Andrew Nelson:** so if you just want to start with an introduction your name a little bit where you're from.

**Laura Waterman:** Laura Waterman, I was born if you want to go back to that I was born in Trenton New Jersey. My father was a teacher at the Lawrenceville School. And, he was from Vermont, in fact he was from Bradford, Vermont which you probably came through on your way here.

**Ashley McMillan:** Yeah, we did.

**LW:** And this is important to my story because even though I was born in New Jersey, Vermont was very important to me and since he was a teacher he had summers off and he was an English teacher and he brought his family, starting from when I was five years old, I was the oldest, up to Southern Vermont, Wilmington. And we lived in a pretty this would've been 1945 the last year of the Second World War and it was pretty primitive living arrangements.

**AN:** that's awesome.

**LW:** and our camp, I mean we had running water but we had no hot water and we had it was lake water that came through the tap. And so we had to pump in. My brother and I would pump the water for drinking water, and didn't have telephones. We have electricity, and it was right on the lake and right in the middle of the woods, so I felt I mean since I grew up.

**AN:** yeah since five pretty much.

**LW:** I really felt how important it was to, I mean we weren't in suburbia we were really in the woods and that developed a great love for being in the woods and I have a very strong visceral feeling of what that landscape around our camp was. I mean deep shaded woods and large rocks that of course looked a lot larger to me I was a little kid.

**AN:** yeah I can imagine. That's awesome. So you definitely would say that upbringing from the age of five years old you said that upbringing definitely influenced where you took your life from there. Where you were you started taking it?

**LW:** yeah I think. I mean it made me really love being outside. Running around the woods we have a lot of independence, umm I learned how to swim that first summer and yeah my comfort my ability to feel comfortable outdoors in the woods.

**AN:** now did that continue, how long did that continue all the way through your whole life high school age do we go up as well Vermont still?

**LW:** Umm, we switched over to New Hampshire.

**AN:** you started going to New Hampshire, awesome White Mountains

**LW:** and we were in the Monadnock area....

**AN:** Cool!

**LW:**... in the town of Jaffrey and that was not quite so woodsy, but we were still outside a lot, all the time, we belong to a little club on the lake down there, played tennis, went swimming. I taught swimming. I'd climb Mount Monadnock a couple of times a summer

**AN:** awesome!

**LW:** and so all these early things figure in. But I think what you're for what you're interested, one of those summers I guess it was, let's see my senior year of high school summer when I graduated from high school.

**AN:** yup

**LW:** I was a counselor at a camp in Freedom, New Hampshire called Cragged Mountain Farm. And we made a trip to Carter Notch hut. And that, that did it for me.

**AN:** yeah really sealed the deal.

**LW:** have you been up to Carter Notch.

**AN:** I have not. But that's... is that a big trek?

**LW:** it's 3 to 4 miles up to the hut, not hard walking particularly, but you know it's 4 miles and then when you get in there it's this mountain defile

**AN:** yup.

**LW:** and it's if you could imagine Crawford Notch. Or one of the White Mountain notches like Franconia Notch without a road in it and filled with boulders. And the mountains rising up on either side that Carter Notch is like now.

**AN:** wow that's awesome.

**LW:** so we spent a couple of days there with camp group, climbed Wildcat, and climbed Carter Dome and walked out on this great boulder field there, and I was just..

**AN:** Sold pretty much from that point on, awesome!

**AM:** Wow that sounds cool

**LW:** except I didn't really have a way to..Yah know

**AN:** Sustain?

**LW:** Yah,

**AN:** Yeah that was going to be one of my next questions is where have you lived because of that or what jobs have you done as a result lifestyle you like to live that White Mountain lifestyle?

**LW:** well I went to college, and after that I went to live in New York City for practically 10 year. So, but somewhere along the line about my seventh or eighth year in New York, I really loved being in New York. I was working for a couple of different publishing companies and I'm really glad that I had that city part of my life because it just added to the overall richness I would say.

**AM:** yeah, just the experience of it, being in the city

**AN:** That balance.

**LW:** exactly, and making a living for yourself and making friends, finding; there was so much art, culture, and music and I tried to take advantage of that. But then I realized that I needed, all of a sudden it happened pretty quickly, I just, like the city began to feel oppressive and, so somebody actually mentioned the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) to me and I got in touch with them found out that they ran weekend..I mean they had walks Saturdays and Sundays up into the areas of north of New York in the Hudson Highland or Harriman State Park. I don't know if you ever explored any of those areas, its amazing woodland.

**AN:** That's awesome.

**LW:** just a bus ride or train ride out of New York City.

**AN:** Joined a group too?

**LW:** Daytrip. Good including the Shawmagunks, that came a little later for me, but then I wrote..So I began going on these hikes and they were extending to sort of into the late fall. So I was getting used to the cold weather hiking that way and then I realized that the AMC offered rock climbing and just to back up a little bit when I was I think nineteen, Well Annapurna was climbed and that was the first 8, 000 meter peak to be climbed in 1950 when I would've been ten and when the book came out on that by Maurice Herzog, I read that. For some reason my parents bought it. I mean they weren't in a way all that outdoorsy but...

**AN:** Just one of those books to have

**LW:** But they bought it and read it at 11 years old or 10 whatever it was. And I can't say I..There was a lot of words I didn't know like crevasse and abseil which is kind of a French way of saying repel. But there was something about that striving for the top that I kept thinking I could do that.

**AM:** That's what I love about climbing.

**LW:** Do you really?!

**AN:** Would you say that's maybe one that's like one of the traditions you'd like to preserve or custom related to the White Mountains. You said that sense of accomplishment reaching the top of a mountain, is something like that a tradition or custom that you really like and want to preserve about the White Mountains?

**LW:** Well I think that. I don't know if I'd want to word it that way particularly.

**AN:** Yeah word it in your own words.

**LW:** But I think it's like you said Ashley, It's something that if you read about it or talk to people who have had that experience, if you would, can identify with that. I mean maybe you won't then that just doesn't interest you but if it's something that you think ahh I want to do that or I could do that then I don't know if you call that a tradition or even that it should be preserved but I think it's more how human nature is.

**AM:** I think it's like a personal thing too.

**LW:** Yeah. Yeah its personal it goes along with goal setting and I setting goals is a happy healthy good thing for humans.

**AM:** Definitely

**LW:** Then I read the Sir Hilary Edmunds book on Everest after they climbed Everest a few years later, so those things stuck with me. And so when I read about the AMC's rock climbing program. That's what I really wanna do and so I got in touch with them.

**AM:** And were still in New York at this point?

**LW:** I was. It was in 1969 the fall of 69 that I started the climbing with the AMC and that really changed my life basically.

**AM:** Yup

**AN:** is that where you learned a lot of your skills? Was from the AMC?

**LW:** Absolutely, yeah right and I met my husband that next spring in 1970. Well I had met him in the fall but we got together in the spring. Guy Waterman

**AN:** Yup

**LW:** and that really changed my life.

**AN:** Yeah

**AM:** So were you working for the AMC or were you just going on these outings?

**LW:** Just outings. Yeah. but I went from working for publishing companies to working for backpack... well first working for a climbing store in New York cause also the publishing that had been very important to me; suddenly my mind was just on a different track. I mean it was kind of people should be careful about climbing cause you can derail and it can change you.

**AM:** Oh yeah definitely.

**LW:** you sometimes feel that way?

**AM:** yeah

**LW:** So I began working for climbing store and then through working there met the man who was starting *Backpacker Magazine*. And his name was Phil Kinsley and he had been a climber or was a climber and a mountaineer and started backpacker. Do you know that magazine?

**AN:** No, I'm not familiar with it.

**LW:** is that right? I think it's still being published.

**AN:** Traditional magazines aren't published as much anymore as they used to be. Now everything is digital now. It's tough.

**LW:** Look and see if..They have got to be online.

**AN:** Yeah, I am sure they have some sort of an e-publication now. Most of them have both. There kind of doing a transition now where you see some places starting to get rid of the actual paper copy so it depends where you're at. So you said when you met Guy that changed a lot would you say he taught you a lot of stuff or he taught you a lot of the skills that you needed?

**LW:** Yeah, definitely. Yeah we really had fun climbing together and enjoyed all the people who were climbing with AMC then.

**AN:** So you had a good group.

**LW:** Very good group, and very experienced most of them would go out every summer to the big mountains in the west or Canada and I mean there was a, they were extremely skilled. Real mountaineers,

**AM:** Yeah I bet

**LW:** or go to Europe or the Alps. So it was excellent terrain.

**AN:** What would you say maybe the most challenging thing was at that time?

**LW:** You mean in my life?

**AN:** Yeah, was it the actual mountaineering itself or is it the climbing and hiking or was it just the lifestyle traveling a lot from New York and what not?

**LW:** Guy had started climbing in 63' so he had several years of experience more than I did and also he was working in New York. He was working for General Electric Company. He was a speech writer for their top executives and also had three boys and at that time he was in the process of getting divorced which happened eventually. And he was really looking to get out of New York and get into the kind of life that made the mountains more available to him. In other words he was feeling his rather schizophrenic life of spending weekends in the mountains and days in New York and offices and on pavement. And I to0 I had been in New York for close to ten years and was very caught up with climbing and so I welcomed that idea of looking for a place where we were actually thinking of having a homestead, you know growing our own food, heating our own house with wood and eventually managed that. And bought land right two miles up the road. A couple of dirt roads from here.

**AN:** Yeah, so that was one of those goals like you were saying goal setting that was one of those things you wanted to accomplish and accomplished it.

**LW:** Right, that's right Andrew and It took a lot of thinking out and planning. And so I don't know if I would call it hard but I would certainly call it challenging. Hugely challenging. I mean in a way we didn't want.. We wanted to be extremely well prepared.

**AN:** Yeah. Very much about the experience.

**AM:** Definitely a huge transition going from the city where everything is need is so available.

**LW:** Right. So we knew we were not going to be buying meat or keeping animals that would give us meat because if we were farmers who had animals then we would not be able to go climbing.

**AN:** Yeah

**LW:** And climbing was kind of, that was most important thing for us basically. so and we did not really know how we were going to earn a living and we thought writing could be a possibility as I said Guy was a writer, I was an editor. But we saved our money for about two and half years. He was being well paid by GE. I was being not very well paid. As happened in those days for women. And so I mean we cut out things like going to movies, going to dinner,

**AN:** Just climbing life.

**LW:** Yeah. And banked money so that when we began looking for land we were in a position when we found a piece of land that suited us to be able to pay for that outright.

**AN:** Awesome.

**LW:** We knew it was important not to go into any experiment with debt with any... any sort of debt.

**AN:** any financial drawbacks?

**LW:** Exactly, so we were lucky enough because of my working for *Backpacker Magazine* that the editor who really became a friend, said, well you have to eat right? Why don't you eat..evaluate all the freeze dry food that's on the market today? And we did that for and wrote about it for about two years. It's not that we ate only freeze dried food for two years but we ate a great deal of it and all those evaluations got published in *Backpacker Magazine*.

**AN:** Awesome

**LW:** So that kind of got us off to a good start with already a little money and later got connected with a magazine out of Boston called *New England Outdoors* and they accepted, we began writing a column for them, "Hiking and Camping", and that was a monthly, once a month column, and that went on for about five years this was all in the 70's. Near the end 70's we were approached by a publisher to who offered to put these columns into a book, so that's basically how our Wilderness Ethics books came to be. *Backwoods* was the first it came out in 1979.

**AM:** That's awesome that you could keep the writing with your lifestyle.

**LW:** it worked out. That meant we were able to live on our homestead and not go off the land to earn money and we could schedule our life to work in gardening the wood collecting, really keeping our homestead going, with the climbing and the writing so we were own bosses and our own schedule makers and I think you have to be disciplined to keep that up.

**AM:** Oh for sure.

**LW:** And that's not to say that we didn't feel pressure or almost harassment sometimes. Well that's just how life is, I think, and you just work through the experiences that are difficult.

**AN:** It all works out.

**LW:** It does

**AN:** Would you say you had like a role model or figure you kind of looked up throughout any point throughout your experiences? Maybe somebody from the AMC for example you said that was a big part of your life? Was there somebody you guys especially looked up to or you especially looked up to?

**LW:** Well I think, Boy there have been a lot of people who have inspired me and I guess speaking as a woman who was climbing especially back then when there were not that many women climbing. I began getting very interested in women, the women who had climbed before me, the history of it. Maybe you feel this way too.

**AM:** Oh definitely.

**AN:** That's why we brought her along exactly.

**LW:** Well Super! And I think and there were some of the girls but they were not... the women who began changing climbing for other women who could be the role models for you like Lynn Hill, for instance, hadn't started climbing when I started so

**AN:** you were pretty alone for the field.

**LW:** For ice climbing particularly, there were, I wouldn't want to say there weren't any women climbing ice but I can't think of any.

**AM:** Even still there is few.

**LW:** There are not many now either?

**AM:** Well there's more but I mean it's still a male dominated sport I have found.

**LW:** So you have been doing some ice climbing too?

**AM:** um no, I have never been ice climbing.

**AN:** Yeah my roommates both ice climb.

**LW:** They ice climb?

**AN:** Yeah.



**AM:** I would like to try it some day.

**AN:** Yeah one of my roommates is an adventure education major

**LW:** Oh, that's right your mentioned that. And he is the one who is going to take you climbing.

**AN:** Yeah exactly. Or maybe she will take me sometime.

**LW:** Ashley, Exactly! So I had turned to, I just got really interested in the history of women climbers and once you really start to dig into it there are a lot and they go all the way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And maybe you found out some of them but they wrote great books about it, well Arlene Blunt she is another whose actually she is more or less my age so, but she definitely achieved in climbing definitely to admire and emulate. But Guy was a huge influence on me and really in every way. I mean writing, climbing he is definitely my mentor for both of those and I mean I learned how to write through him. And my father actually was a, both my parents, influenced me. My dad because he was also a writer and a teacher and a scholar and our household was quite circled around his schedule so I knew that felt when Guy and I needed to make a schedule for our own lives that allowed for maximum time for the things that were important to us and gosh so I would say they were really the big influences aside from and then adding to the women I read about from the past. And certainly some contemporaries in mind like climbers in particular the women I admire many strong women climbers out there.

**AN:** Do you have a favorite anecdote or memory overall that will stay with you forever or something from the White Mountains? Something that will just kind of always stick in your head?

**LW:** Gosh, well I can.. I have a lot of memories.

**AN:** Maybe a high one, top one, top couple, anything, I know that's tough. It is a bomb dropper.

**LW:** I will give you one very specific one and then I can give you a sort of overall ongoing one that played out over a lot of years being up in the White Mountains. But the I would say the 1975 Guy and I did the ice climb The Black Dyke on Cannon cliff. Do you know that?

**AN:** Yeah it is one of the steepest faces right?

**LW:** It's the one. Do you know actually maybe I can find it? The Whitney-Gilman Ridge is right there and that was put up in 1928 and back here where it is all shadowy is it's a gully only it's very steep and it ices up in the winter time and ice climbers were trying to do that route many years, ill pass over another book hold on. We gave the climbing history of that route. The Black Dyke in our Yankee Rock & Ice. and it was climbed finally in 1971, this is really amazing, it was climbed by John Bouchard who did it as a solo climb.

**AM:** Wow.

**AN:** That's Impressive.

**LW:** And I think he dropped one his tools in the process.

**AM:** One of his picks?

**LW:** Yeah. I believe he did. Or maybe he recovered it I don't know. But he dropped it. So we had, actually Guy and I were the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> ascent of Black Dyke. And it's hard for me to talk about myself in this way but I was the first women to do a route in winter on Cannon Cliff. And that was The Black Dyke.

**AN:** Wow. That's amazing. That is exactly what we want to hear, that's awesome.

**LW:** And yeah it's a very cherished memory.

**AN:** That's definitely something you should be extremely proud of. That's awesome.

**LW:** Thanks Andrew. I appreciate that.

**AN:** Wow look at those pictures.

**LW:** You can get that book by the way its E-book or probably there's copies around.

**AN:** Yeah I will have to show my roommate this.

**LW:** oh good.

**AN:** He will love that.

**LW:** We loved writing it. We got we interviewed all these climbers that would put up the routes around here during the 70's, 80's, and 90's. And I mean most of them were dead by the time the book came out just about. So that route is absolutely primo and in fact I'll tell you that when we got to the top of it we were, it was very hard to mount the last pitch or at least I had trouble with it because I think I was kind of tired. And we were using I could show you the tools we used for it but I mean, they were primitive.

**AN:** yeah, not what we would recognize today with the nice ice hooks

**LW:** No, I mean to us they were the leading edge tools but the way the look now is..

**AM:** looking back now.

**LW:** So, my ice axe was that long. And you know your wailing away like that and I was getting tired out and it took me a long time to do the last pitch. And by the time I got to the top Guy and I were just so elated and exhausted that we were in tears.

**AN:** yeah I can imagine.

**AM:** Yeah, Wow.

**LW:** So that, and then the other really climb not quite in the category of The Black Dyke we had done of ton of climbing in Tuckerman, in Huntington Ravine. Huntington. Have you been up there?

**AM:** I've been up to Tucks a couple of times.

**LW:** To Huntington Ravine and seen the ice rifts?

**AM:** I don't think I have been up there.

**LW:** Not in the winter time. But it was I think it still is because it's off the road. The climbs are not that hard especially by today's standard. But there, it's a wild place. And it can get very wild if the weather gets bad. And it does not take much to get bad. And we had climbed all the gullies many times but it was really thrilling for me to be able to lead Guy up Pinnacle gully which is the hardest one there. And from what I heard I guess I was the first women to do that.

**AN:** Wow that's awesome.

**LW:** I wouldn't say that a hundred percent but no one has turned up to contradict or..

**AN:** Well I am giving it to you then.

**LW:** So that was just great. But every one of our climbs that we did together in the White Mountains was memorable. We especially liked to go to out of the way places. I mean if you're driving through the White Mountains in the winter time you can see there are all these slides or you know icy areas that come down from ridges and we liked to bushwhack into those and climb it.

**AN:** you would go looking for that.

**LW:** and most of these you could do without a rope. I mean if you were comfortable enough

**AN:** Yeah that is amazing.

**LW:** But then to answer your question another way what was memorable was the work we did on the Franconia Ridge. Which was with the AMC had started a trail adopt a program in 1980 and we adopted the ridge which went from the summit of Lafayette to Little Haystack. About 2 miles (1.8). and what was important to us was that it was above tree line and we got very interested in I mean that led to a lot of really wonderful things for us because we saw the importance of, the difficulty and importance of the difficulty of maintaining a trail above tree line that saw much tramping and this difficulty of preserving the one tread way. But making it clear to people, we didn't want people to feel like they were walking on a sidewalk or feeling confined so posting signs like at the bottom of the trailhead or at the bottom at the hut cautioning

people to step on rocks if you're going off trail not plants. And the AMC was promoting this as well so we did we spend lot of time up on that trail.

**AN:** It is important you know. Preserving that for future climbers which is a big thing, that's pretty awesome. Do you have anything else you would like to add? Any final points or interesting things you want to tell us.

**LW:** Well

**AN:** It's been amazing so far. I think we check off a lot of the points here. Yeah let me just you some time to free talk if you would like.

**LW:** Well I think for me the thing for me.. It's great for people to have fun in the mountains and really enjoy the mountains especially with what the White Mountains have to offer it's really amazing. The environmental message is the most important thing. And for me I would like to say people to need to I would think just by going to the mountains want to take care of them.

**AN:** That would maybe be a point of advice to people trying to follow in your footsteps in the future?

**LW:** I'd say, and not just for the mountains but for the whole world.

**AN:** Awesome. Alright thank you very much.

**LW:** Thank you Andrew.