

## 'Summer Camps' exhibit is Museum of the White Mountains best yet

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**By Ed Parsons**

When the Museum of the White Mountains opened up a few years ago in Plymouth, it was a great new development in the mountains, combining history, art, education and science. I made a point of writing about each exhibit.

From the perspective of a baby boomer like myself, subjects about my generation were on display there, placed in the context of history. This is true again in the new exhibit called "Summer Camps: The White Mountains, Roots of An Iconic American Experience."

Personally, I think this is one of the best exhibits so far. It touches a deep chord with so many people, whose early experiences at summer camps not only brought them to the White Mountains, but helped shape their lives. It applies to present day youth as well.

When I have visited the museum in the past, I made a point to hike Welsh/Dickey Mountain near Waterville that morning before going, in order to emphasize in my hiking column that experience in the mountains is equally important.

However for this visit, I went over to the museum with two good friends on a rainy day. We made a day of it, and had lunch at one of Plymouth's interesting restaurants afterward. Food and conversation solidified the experience, and I recommend this more traditional museum visit as well to Mount Washington Valley residents.

When you walk in the door of the museum, you pass the university students manning the front desk, then enter the main hall, where the newest exhibit literally unfolds like an open book before you. The exhibits are always a great multimedia combination of words, photos, paintings, videos with sound, activities and objects.

This time was no exception. The three of us separated and browsed at our own speed. After the first round, I connected with the director Cynthia Robinson, who was in her office, and she came out to talk to us.

She said the summer camp exhibit has been a year and a half in development. Many camps were contacted and invited to contribute material, most in the Newfound Lake, Squam Lake and Lake Winnipisaukee regions. Robinson, Plymouth State University's Marcia Blaine and Paul Hutchinson from Boston University were co-curators of the exhibit.

Hutchinson delved deeply into the history and sociology of summer camps and wrote the text for the exhibit catalogue, available for purchase at the museum or online.

The first summer camp for boys anywhere was Camp Chocorua, on an island in Squam Lake, started in 1881. The founder saw the need to separate boys from their wealthy parents who were staying at luxury hotels in the north country, and supply an atmosphere of "rugged communalism" where they could develop friendships and skills, and experience living and working together in a natural setting.

The first girl's camp ever was Camp Redcroft on Newfound Lake, location of the present day girl's camp, Onaway.

From these simple beginnings a great variety of summer camps evolved over the years countrywide. Directly or indirectly, they have effected nearly everyone.

The camp experience is transformative, and can change the direction of lives. To demonstrate this, Robinson said that last summer, interns from Plymouth State University were sent out to camp reunions to interview people who had been to New Hampshire summer camps years ago, to record their stories of camp experiences and how it affected their lives. Presently 164 interviews have taken place.

Three-minute video clips, combining some of these interviews with photos and old movies were made. At the far end of the exhibit hall, some of these can be watched and listened to with earphones. They are also on the museum website at [www.plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains](http://www.plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains). The goal is to make 25 of these videos.

These videos compliment the exhibits of various camps around the hall, and help to understand the great variety of camps that have existed over the years. For example, Groton Camp was a place where students from the exclusive Groton School were counselors.

The campers there were at risk inner city kids. This gave both of these groups an expanded experience of the world. Maplewood Caddy Camp in Bethlehem was where similar city kids were able to get out of the city and become quality golf caddies, important for the area's hotel/golf courses, like the Maplewood Hotel there, and the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods. Camp Hale on Squam Lake has effected the lives of many city kids. Early girl's camps like Camp Onaway had uniforms, and there are examples of these dresses.

It is an understatement that much has changed and evolved. Camps have come and gone, changed their names, moved, grown, etc. A girl's camp in the exhibit called Ogontz Camp in Lyman, is now a conference center.

Also included in the exhibit are some colorful paintings from the White Mountain School worth seeing. But scattered in plentitude around the walls are old black and white photos of happy boys and girls at camp.

To get a grasp on how these places have changed the physical and spiritual landscape of the White Mountains, check out the website and then go to the exhibit.