

# The Lure of the Mountains

Kathi Caldwell-Hopper - January 29, 2016, The Taker.com

All it takes is a glimpse of the majestic White Mountains to become hooked on hiking. The mountains seem to rise up and beckon from the edge of Lake Winnepesaukee. The peaks roll on and on, enticing us to take to their trails and see for ourselves why the mountains are so incredibly popular with seasoned and beginning hikers.

It has been that way for centuries, but it wasn't until the mid to late 1800s that the northern Lakes Region and White Mountains became a Mecca for those who wanted to explore the woods of New Hampshire. With more trail use, groups of hikers realized maintenance was needed to protect the pathways and the land. When a severe storm such as the Hurricane of 1938 ripped into the land and tossed trees and debris over hiking trails, clubs worked together to clear the paths.

A culture of roughing it, sleeping under the stars, cooking over a campfire and taking to the woods sprang up all over the White Mountains. It is this culture that is explored in the current exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains in Plymouth.

The Museum is relatively new to the area (it opened around 2013 and is situated in a former church on the edge of the Plymouth State University campus at 34 Highland Street.

The day I visited (a Friday afternoon in mid January), I had a case of cabin fever mixed with the desire to go to a museum and see some art or a fun exhibit. I decided to take the afternoon off and see what was going on in the campus town of Plymouth. I'd do some shopping, have lunch and see what the Museum of the White Mountains had to offer.

I found a parking space near the museum, so I made it my first stop and planned to get lunch later. Entering the brick building, I found the interior to be light and airy and welcoming. The lobby area houses a small gift shop, manned by college students who were happy to chat and tell me about the exhibits, past and present. (A past exhibit on the White Mountain painters, one staffer told me, was very, very popular, which comes as no surprise to me, a fan of this genre of painting.)

I was invited to browse the exhibit (there is no admission fee), and I stepped into the large gallery where all sorts of wonderful things awaited exploration. The current exhibit is called *Trail Clubs: Connecting People With the Mountains*. If I ever wondered who cut and maintained many of the old trails in the mountains of NH, I was about to learn the names of some great clubs that took on the work of keeping the trails in good shape.

The story of the clubs is fascinating. A very early logbook from the White Mountain Club of Portland is on display in a clear plexiglass case. The club was founded in 1873 and was the second mountaineering organization in North America and the first club devoted entirely to exploring the highlands of northern NH and western Maine. The charming story tells us the club was officially organized near Carrigain Brook, on the lower slopes of Mount Carrigain by six Portland men accompanied by two guides.

Why did they decide to start the club? Although we cannot be certain, it was probably because they liked to be in the woods and they wanted to maintain the natural world they enjoyed. The ledger book records, in beautiful cursive handwriting, the work done by club members to survey the land and identify various mountains. They made maps of the Mahoosuc Range and Mt. Carrigain and calculated the height of the mountains. Members with artistic skill drew the lay of the lands, so to speak, sketching the unique features of the mountains, such as ridges.

I particularly loved the beautiful old painting of a very mountainous area. In a gold frame, the painting seemed to be of the White Mountain School of Painters. Identifying information next to the painting told me it created by White Mountain Club member George Frederick Morse, who painted the scene during the first recorded exploration of rugged and very remote Mahoosuc Notch.

The Tamworth-area Wonalancet Out Door Club is featured in the exhibit with a large copy of the club logo that adorned a 1950s trail map. Clearly, this shows that interest in the trails and hiking clubs only gained in popularity after that first club was formed in the 1870s.

Other fascinating information in the exhibit includes an old map drawn by Randolph trail builder Charles C. Torrey showing the impact of heavy logging on the northern Presidentials in about 1905. The damage to the mountains by logging had a big impact on hikers; thus was formed the Randolph Mountain Club in 1910.

Another plexiglass exhibit case holds a display of old trail pamphlets and books, such as the Waterville Athletic and Improvement Association's *Guide to Short Walk*; the Chocorua Mountain Club's *Code of the Woods* from 1928 and an early *AMC White Mountain Guide* book among others. (I also read that the Wonalancet Out Door Club published one of the first local White Mountain trail guides in 1901, quite an accomplishment considering they worked without the aid of the sophisticated surveying equipment at our disposal today.)

Admittedly, my favorite part of the exhibit was an entire wall display of old wooden trail signs. A museum guide told me some of the signs were donated for the exhibit, but some are from the museum's collection. She agreed that each sign is a rustic gem, and reflect a bit of the culture that went with hiking when the trail clubs were in their infancy.

I gazed up, up, up at the wall of signs and was charmed by such wording as “STOP! The area ahead has the worst tourism in America. Many have suffered from over-exposure, especially in summer. Turn back at the first sign of goofers”; “AMC Mahoosuc Trail to Grafton Notch Dream Lake Gentian Pond Shelter”; or wording that said simply “Square Ledge” with an arrow pointing the way. The signs are weather-beaten, attesting to the ever-changing weather in the mountains. If you like old, weathered signs, this display alone makes the exhibit a must-see.

Nearby in a plexiglass case a goatskin is on display with the signatures of 1920s-1930s hikers to the Randolph Mountain Club’s Crag Camp.

The exhibit also features lots of old photos of snowshoers, hikers, men and women from long ago working on trail maintenance and even some outhouse culture!

A huge log cabin called the Neil Tilltonson Shelter, depicting in life size what a shelter/hut in the mountains would have looked like, encompasses an entire wall and is definitely worth seeing.

One of the museum staff told me, as I ended my tour, that the exhibit would be up until March 6. They are also quite excited about the next exhibit, which will open in early April, called *Taking the Lead – Women in the White Mountains*.

The exhibit will trace the history of women in the early settlements of the White Mountains, as well as lots of paintings, displays of what early women wore, how women used the White Mountains in their work and leisure, among other topics. Of course the exhibit will feature Lucy Crawford, among the most well known White Mountain women.

The current exhibit is surely worth a trip to Plymouth to learn more about the early outing clubs of the White Mountains. Some of the clubs are still active and all played a part in protecting and maintaining the lands that seem to rise up from the Lakes Region, always beckoning us, as they did the hikers who came before, to take to the woods.

*(The Museum of the White Mountains is open Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 am to 5 pm; Wednesdays from 10 am to 7 pm and Saturdays and Sundays from noon to 5 pm; it is closed Mondays and Plymouth State University holidays. For information, call 535-3210.)*

- See more at: <http://thelaker.com/the-lure-of-the-mountains#sthash.NJGR3hMO.dpuf>