

Tracing the history of the Museum of the White Mountains

By Tom Eastman

PLYMOUTH — Three years in the making, and located 52 miles from Conway, the Museum of the White Mountains opened in February 2013 in a renovated 1946-built Methodist Church at Plymouth State University.

It has fulfilled a long-held dream of having a facility to house art, photographs and artifacts pertaining to the region's history.

Following the departure of founding director Catherine Amidon late last year, history professor Marcia Schmidt Blaine was named interim director in February.

Blaine's research focuses on the development of American identity in the 18th century and Americans' historical relationship with the White Mountains.

She is co-curator with Cynthia Robinson, director of PSU's Karl Drerup Art Gallery, of the museum's current exhibit, "Taking the Lead: Women and the White Mountains."

Blaine was out of the country this week and unavailable for comment, but Robinson was happy to share the museum's goals and plans.

"The museum has lots going on and in the works," said Robinson. "The big development is to connect the museum to many areas of PSU and the region's community. We are moving from one exhibit a year to up to four, and expanding the content. We are thinking about exhibits as interdisciplinary touchstones for thinking and engaging in themes that have meaning for the White Mountains region. As such, the museum is fast becoming a place where all kinds of PSU students and classes can engage in art and information."

Upcoming exhibits are to include "Inspired by Place: Poetry and Printmaking and the White Mountains Today" in fall, and "Forecast: Art Meets Science — Climate Change" for winter 2017.

While located on the western side of the mountains, the museum's genesis has many local ties here on the eastern side of the Whites.

The role played by late local history enthusiast Dan Noel of Intervale was crucial to the museum's founding.

"This (museum) was my father's dying wish," Victoria Noel of North Conway told the Sun in 2013.

Dan Noel donated 9,000 items from his extensive White Mountains history collection shortly before dying from cancer in 2010 at age 68.

"He had accumulated his collection through a lifetime of going to yard sales and auctions," Victoria Noel said.



Marcia Schmidt Blaine was named interim director of the Museum of the White Mountains several months ago. (COURTESY PHOTO)

"Having a museum to showcase the history of the White Mountains was a huge dream of his. This all came to fruition on Jan. 27, 2010 — less than a month before he died."

That donation led others to follow suit, according to fellow collector Dick Hamilton, 80, former president of the White Mountains Attractions Association.

Like Victoria Noel, he is a member of the museum's 10-member advisory committee.

"There's no question that Dan's gift put what had been an idea into action and brought it over the top," said Hamilton, a North Conway native who lives in Littleton.

"Many of us had dreamed of a White Mountain history museum for years, but it had only been talked about.

"In Dan's last days," Hamilton continued, "he was talking about perhaps giving it to the Conway Historical Society or the Conway Library, but I told him he ought to give some consideration to the idea of giving it to the university. His donation was the first collection that went to the museum. The idea of a museum being at the university was a plan that took off."

Hamilton also has donated much of his own collection to Plymouth.

Other driving forces leading to the creation of the museum was Steve Barba — former operator/co-owner of the Balsams Grand Resort of Dixville Notch and at the time director of community relations for PSU — and former PSU president Sara Jayne Steen.

"The museum has been well-received," said Hamilton. "It has become a good resource that has protected for posterity artifacts relating to White Mountain history. I look for it to continue to grow."

More than 6,000 books are part of the museum's collection, including first editions of pioneering homesteader Lucy Crawford's "History of the White Mountains."

Committee member Barba donated his entire Dixville Notch book collection, and another significant contribution of rare books and rare maps was made by summer resident Jack Newton of Lancaster.

The museum now houses many negatives of late photographer Dick Smith (1927-2006) of North Conway. Smith was a prolific photographer, especially of skiing in the Mount Washington Valley from the 1950s to the '90s.

Hamilton, who led the effort to create a memorial to the Old Man of the Mountain in Franconia, said the museum celebrates the White Mountains' rich history.

"People for the almost past 200 years have been interested in the White Mountains as a place. We were a No. 1 destination for many years during the grand hotel era. A lot has happened here."

An exhibit on the grand hotels may be mounted within the next two years, according to Hamilton, an expert on the historic structures. "I'm really looking forward to that," he said.

Past exhibits have included:

- "Trail Clubs: Connecting People with the Mountains," curated by Mike Dickerman, Steve Smith and Ben Amsden, March 31, 2015-March 2, 2016. The exhibit showcased the important role trail clubs have played in creating an iconic hiking trail system and community in the White Mountains.
- "Beyond Granite: The Geology of Adventure," curated by Sarah Garlick, March 25, 2014-March 8, 2015. It explored the geological underpinnings of three of the most popular forms of recreation in the White Mountains: climbing, hiking, and skiing/snowboarding.
- "Through the Eyes of the Dealers: Bob and Dot Goldberg," curated by Marcia Schmidt Blaine with Charles Vogel, Oct. 17, 2013-March 2, 2014. Robert A. "Bob" Goldberg (1918-97) of North Conway was a major dealer of White Mountain School of Art paintings, and was as impassioned about the area as he was the

paintings. All works were on loan from the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, to which Bob and his late wife, Dorothy H. Goldberg (1917-97), bequeathed their extensive collection.

- "Passing Through: The Allure of the White Mountains, " curated by Marcia Schmidt-Blaine, Feb. 23, 2013-March 2, 2014. The first exhibition hosted at the newly opened museum, it employed images, interpretive panels, films and interactive technologies to invite visitors to question the influence of time and space on human connections with nature.

The museum is located at 34 Highland St. on the campus of Plymouth State University. For more information, visit www.plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains or call (603) 535-3210.

The Conway Daily Sun - All Rights Reserved