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Sally Manikian

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Eight Weeks on Scudder

*Writing from the pandemic at the fringes of
the White Mountain National Forest*

Sally Manikian

“**W**AIT A MINUTE: IT’S RIGHT THERE?”

The weedy, wide logging road at my back, I faced a dark green tunnel of mossy ground and spruce-fir walls. The narrow route fell cleanly into the category of “hiking trail.” It was late April 2020. After three or four frustrating and unsettled weeks trying to find the best evening close-to-home hike for my dogs and me, I had finally arrived: the Scudder Trail.

A few weeks earlier, when the sled dog mushing and racing season had ended but before the usual hiking season fully began, I looked for trails where I could take my dogs, routes with a south-facing aspect and low elevation, less ice, and easier traveling. My biggest emotions have always needed big spaces, and this pandemic spring brought a lot of big emotions. In a wash of anxiety and fear, March moved to April, the transitional month that has always been hard for me emotionally, and especially so this year. Rooted to my desk for work, the daily question of where to hike with my dogs connected me to bigger things: the positive attitudes and love of my dog team and of my mountains.

“My mountains.” The possessive here is not of the actual landscape, but representative of the life I’ve lived in these mountains. My memories that live in and among the ravines, ponds, and ridgelines: hiking trails I’ve built, National Park Service boundary lines I’ve painted, places where I got a little lost off-trail amid the disorientation of the hillsides. Throughout the pandemic spring of April and May, and into June, I walked over and over again on the same trail, as ground turned to grass and brown turned to green leaves and snow turned to moss, every trip an incremental step forward, while the world I experienced at my desk stalled in uncertainty.

When I have the time to look up and wonder at the world, I usually find myself sitting on the floor by my bookcase, flipping through the twenty years of my hand-penned journals. There, I locate my former self and track



Late afternoon during the pandemic: Speck accompanies Sally Manikian up a local peak in Shelburne, New Hampshire. SALLY MANIKIAN

the small decisions and significant events that have directed my life's path to where I am now. In a similar fashion, during the eight weeks on the Scudder Trail, I met my old memories in the mountains.

Those trail and mountain memories were a tool to decoding and understanding where I stood, both geographically and emotionally, in the current pandemic reality. Looking back isn't just an act of nostalgia. It can be a force of strength in a world of fear.

FOR ALMOST TEN YEARS, I'VE LIVED IN THE TOWN OF SHELBURNE, NEW Hampshire, on the northernmost edge of the White Mountain National Forest. One of the first colonized towns in the valley, Shelburne follows a braided

Androscoggin River woven between steep ridgelines. Topography and geology confine houses to the clusters along two roads that parallel the river. Shelburne is a town of about 350 people adjacent to larger towns of Gorham (2,600), Berlin (7,000), and Bethel, Maine (2,600). We are quiet and a refuge for others. Rising on the north edge is the rugged Mahoosuc Range, to the south the softer spine of the Carter-Moriah Range, and the treadway of the Appalachian Trail ties the two together. I chose Shelburne because the mountains are larger than the people, and the people have listened and respected that—no houses crawl up ridgelines, and there are no tourist-driven guest-houses or hip brewpubs. The mountains are in charge.

I chose to live here also because I love the Mahoosucs, a range that has always escaped the population and recreational sprawl of easily accessed areas like Franconia Notch. Surrounded by privately owned timberland, containing absolutely no 4,000-footers, and where most hiking trails are accessible by the rutted, potholed, and dusty Success Pond Road, the Mahoosucs have always felt raw. A sparse set of campsites and shelters remain unstaffed except by a roving caretaker. I was that roving caretaker for two years, when I formed the basis of this love and understanding.

The Mahoosucs harken to the land and heritage of the 1800s, the early days of White Mountain hiking and trailblazing, a place referred to by nineteenth-century explorer Marian Pychowska as the “Success Wilderness,” not because a federal agency and act of Congress declared it so, but because of the wilds it held. When I step onto a trail on these hills, I breathe easier. I know how wide this system is, partly because I know the history and have stared at the maps that show the 30,000 acres of the pure land of Success just on the other side of the ridgeline.

A few popular trails ripple up the flanks of the Mahoosucs: the Centennial Trail that tracks the Appalachian Trail before it reaches the Mahoosuc Trail and the side access paths of the Peabody Brook, Austin Brook, and Dryad Falls Trails. *Popular* is a relative term, here, as the trailheads barely hold spaces for two or three cars. “Popular” in Shelburne usually means one car parked there. The pandemic redefined *popular* on a microscale in Shelburne. The trail to Mount Crag—a less-than-one-mile hike on a well-marked trail through conservation land, leading to a stunning vista—became truly popular. Pre-pandemic, I had hiked that trail many times in the evening with a dog or two and rarely seen anyone or any car. Suddenly, that changed. I saw neighbors, I saw folks from upriver, and I met someone who brought her family on the hike she had last done as a teenager. Every day multiple cars crowded the tiny

lot. I also saw cars with “from-away” plates that brought up a surprising xenophobia in me. In the woods, I gave people a wide berth to pass me. I wanted something else—space—less because I feared contagion but more because I sought a place with fewer people where my mind could be at rest. Knowing of other trails, I resolved to drive past the Mount Crag parking lot every time I saw a car there, pushing on to the logging roads and quieter trails around Mill Brook Road.

Mill Brook Road has been my entry point to the Mahoosucs for almost fifteen years. The first time I set foot on it was in May 2008 as an employee of the Appalachian Mountain Club. It was also my first time in the Mahoosucs. Here I found myself on private timberland and the trail management system at the same time. My job that day was team member of the AMC Trails Department rite of spring, the annual helicopter airlift. It delivers materials for summertime construction, trail work, and maintenance and takes used supplies out.

A lot happened quickly that day. I went from downtown Gorham to Mill Brook Road, where the helicopter roared while my coworkers rushed to load lumber and supplies onto the hooked cable hanging down. I rode in the helicopter to the summit of Mount Carlo, ran down to the campsite, and then stood off to the side while the rotor blades pushed air wildly into the bending tiny spruce trees and the tiny cable hook lowered down. I helped load a bundle of a dismantled outhouse onto the cable. Barely an hour had passed since I had left my car in Gorham.

My supervisor and I rushed back to the summit of Carlo, where the helicopter would pick us up after finishing its other jobs in the range. We paused for a moment and a breath. The two-way radio at our feet buzzed with conversations between the helicopter pilot and the crews on the ground. The radio crackled, the helicopter blades hummed in my ears, and the wide green expanse of privately owned forestland of Success Township spread out at my feet. I saw what the Mahoosucs are: a place where people and forest live close together in trust.

On that same road, in 2011, my dog Quid and I roared uphill in a tiny red Chevy pickup. Suddenly an 18-wheeler barreled down the steep hill on its way to the mill, weighed down with a load of trees. It almost ran us over. The trails were cut over, exposed on all sides to thinned out overstory and new piles of discarded treetops. I learned to keep an eye and ear out for the articulated movement of the skidder with the cleated chains on its giant tires, holding aloft piles of newly cut trees officially now turned to timber. In the ten-year

cycle of management, loggers returned here again in 2019 or so. This is a constantly shifting landscape, with the benefit of an improved road, so I could access the trails and the swimming holes in my no-clearance Toyota Prius.

Mill Brook Road meets the paved North Road at a subtle green street sign. It gives no indication of anything up there other than inconsequential private timberland, land often missed or unseen by hikers. I once read an article in the *Boston Globe* by a travel writer who hiked up the road, musing about the death and decay and spookiness of periodically logged forestland, a place barely offering value for him as a hiker and adventurer. The tone that writer took was problematic for me. It was the tone of a conqueror. He placed himself in a position of authority as someone from a civilized location. That view often underlies the tension in rural towns in tourist destinations. Yet I myself have not been immune to it. During the pandemic spring, I needed to let go of my own assumptions of beauty, trails, and mountains to find a place of safety. I needed a place to hike.

With a mathematical calculation on available time, the time available between my workday ending and my need for dinnertime, I needed a hike that was less than an hour and a half round trip door to door. Unanchored from newly popular Mount Crag, I considered the Scudder Trail, which starts on Mill Brook Road. From the other times I've been on that trail on my way to a Shelburne peak, either Mount Ingalls or Mount Cabot, I remembered that trail as a wide, grassy logging road, where ticks clung to my socks and muck flowed into my shoes, sun at my back as I followed a path that had the logic of a logging road. The first time I'd gone there was in 2010, with Quid. I chose Scudder for a weekend hike of curiosity. I had never repeated it, for there were other, longer, and better trails I hiked for work as an AMC employee. I am not immune to the same blindness and acts of unseeing as the *Boston Globe* writer.

The Scudder Trail meets the privately owned Mill Brook Road about a mile up, where *trailhead* means an intersection of two roads with a handmade sign pointing the way. The entire length of the trail itself is unprotected, passing through 5,000 acres of forestland that is part of a sort of archipelago of tracts from Ontario to Maine managed by one company. In early spring 2020 I started using the Scudder Trail, only traveling up it for ten to fifteen minutes. Before turning around, I sat on a decent stump at the edge of a snowfield, where the bare trees enabled a view across the valley and where the dogs sniffed and explored swampy areas. I rested my mind and ended my day after a steep climb uphill. I stopped at that stump because I had made up

my mind that continuing toward Mount Cabot was a longer commitment, a longer walk.

Then, on April 25, I walked past the snowfield and stump. That day I had enough time and spiritual and physical energy to keep going. I learned the shocking truth that I had been stopping at the threshold of where the trail left the wide logging road and skirted conservation land. I stepped through a narrow tunnel, a series of orange blazes, and a one-foot-wide treadway. The trail was right there, the summit less than 15 minutes farther. My dog companions that day were redhead Squan, whom I'd raised from birth, and blue-eyed Gem, one of my lead dogs. I turned to them and said, "We found it!" Squan happily launched herself at my face (a trait she unfortunately had inherited from her father).

Powered by a new fully achievable goal, a summit that we could reach, hiking up Scudder to Mount Cabot provided a purposeful anchor to the uncertainty the pandemic world created.

Not long after we'd found Mount Cabot and settled into a new routine, the White Mountain National Forest shut down—sort of. Not actually shut down like government shutdowns, since staff members were still employed, but shut down by declaring trailheads closed. Reserves and preserves in some towns and land trusts did the same. These public lands may be forever green, but their protection requires a balance between use and conservation. It is not easy to close public lands, but in mud season of the pandemic year, car and foot traffic to many trails skyrocketed. The WMNF felt it had to close its trailheads.

My friends who still work in land management and recreation management, for AMC and the WMNF, were caught in a tough place of upholding public safety and resource protection while the public demanded access. One had the job of turning people away from the blocked-off parking lots. Another spent a day hiking past gates to put up signs, which someone tore down a day later. For a brief time, some unseen standard of public and mental health seemed to be demanding a higher need than resource protection: the right of longtime seasonal second-home residents to shelter in their properties looming over fragile rural communities. So many seasonal communities deal with tension between those who live normal lives all year and those who prefer to see it as a vacation destination. In my own valley and elsewhere around the national forest, the pandemic only exacerbated these tensions. Those who didn't have a second home also looked to public lands as a place they had a right to visit. This added fuel to a raging fire.

Meanwhile, over in the Mahoosucs, the Scudder Trail remained open. These trails are usually painted as vulnerable: cut over, lacking investment, difficult to find, unattractive to hikers. They cross land as an afterthought, the primary ownership reason preserved for the timber resource to be cut and paid back to investors. I've seen the management maps for these properties. They show protected green of public land in negative space, while the timber lots are darkened and labeled. There are few trails, there are no houses; there are only the lot numbers, logging roads, and landings. Sure, public access is allowed because the Northern Forest allows passage through private land. These are not the cultivated trailheads that govern decision-making on the WMNF to the south or the AT that runs along the spine. When these trails are shut down, it's not because of public health or overuse, it's because of harvesting timber. These plans are never announced to trail managers, so more than a few times in my trail work, I've walked into the woods to find things changed.

It has also not been lost on me that when lodging and restaurants tied to the outdoor tourism industry have been closed and will be challenged to reopen, the timber industry is still at work. For as long as I've lived here, I've sat at tables and conferences and been interviewed by New Hampshire Public Radio where the discussions use the tool of a false either/or. They say that New Hampshire's North Country is either timber or tourism, when both have existed alongside for a long time and will for some time more. The Mahoosucs are not much different from when Marian and Lucia Pychowska explored them in the 1870s. Even that *Boston Globe* writer mused on the irrelevance of timber. Yet in this pandemic timber cutting kept on, the paper mill upriver produced toilet paper, and it changed its supply practices and made that paper available to residents during the early weeks of supply shortages. Tracing the fiber-supply chain, trees cut from this forest could have become that toilet paper.

I left the logging road and kept walking uphill. The Scudder Trail joined the Red Trail and then the Yellow Trail, arriving rapidly at the Mount Cabot loop for the sweeping view into the valley and west toward the Presidentials. While I could have formed a loop using the color-blazed trails of Philbrook Farm Inn, for weeks I kept going up and down Scudder as an out-and-back. The names of these trails, the simple naming by color, appear on the map as almost out of place. In urban parks such as the Blue Hills Reservation outside Boston or a mountain bike park I found once in New Jersey, trails are often color-coded for ease, recognizing hikers who don't need a fancy

name; they just need a blaze to follow. These color-coded trails of Shelburne, tied to the Philbrook Farm Inn and built for the inn's guests, are in many ways the same: These are the "urban" trails of my own town. These trails are so invisible to some that at times they have been left off the AMC *White Mountain Guide* and maps. The Scudder Trail is different, an effort of recent reclamation by my local hiking club, the Shelburne Trails Club, only ten years old.

Walking the same trail almost every day, I rotated through my dog team's nine young puppies, each 10 to 11 months old. I gave them one-on-one coaching time, paired them with a suitable adult dog, and watched how they approached the world of the trail. I tested them on the trail junctions, seeing how they acted without direction from me and seeing which choice they made and why. Hoss blew through intersections determined to be in the lead no matter what. Page looked at the correct trail direction and then chose the other precisely to be contrary and adventurous. Speck padded along quietly and calmly, accurately following weeks of dog scent. The entire family of Squan, Bruce, Skee Ball, Riptide, and Jameson made whip-smart turns because they believe in making good decisions. During our hikes, we met exactly one porcupine, flushed numerous grouse, and spooked a bear into the trees. There were a lot of flowers, biting insects, and eventually brilliant green leaves. In eight weeks, I saw two cars, and two hikers, one a neighbor, and one a hiker I never placed.

As April turned to May and neared June, I started noticing something. It had been a long time since I'd hiked on the same exact trail almost every day, watching the snow melt out and the new ground appear and dry out. I'd grown accustomed to tracking the change of spring in my front yard, snow melting quickly with an extended bare brown limbo, before grass growing, crocuses popping, and leaves greening out. In the lingering spring at higher elevations, where the gap between snow and summer is short, there's an immediacy of transition. Witnessing that visible change across the mountain ecosystem on a daily basis helped my heart and mind anchor, as there wasn't a lot to trust in the pandemic reality but one can always trust snow to melt. "This was snow, only a week ago," I said to the dogs, much as I announced receding snow to Quid the winter we lived at the edge of timberline as caretakers for the Randolph Mountain Club's Gray Knob cabin.

I have always been one to try to level mountains and wilderness to the backyards, always afraid of the risk of holding mountains as a separate dreamy place. We restrict ourselves too much, placing mountains on lists

to be conquered in some residual colonial way or feeling that we are only truly ourselves in a place far away from our homes where we've made full lives. The flip side of this is that it is as well to ask myself the same questions, as the mountains are my backyard. As the snow finally releases its hold on the higher elevations, and higher and longer hikes beckon, even as a resident of this valley, I waver a little bit. Am I complicit then in the new problems?

A friend's comment during the trailhead closures in April has stuck in my head: "I feel like I'm on the edge of articulating something." She wrestled with the tension of supporting access to public lands but was so disappointed by the negative reactions of hikers to trailhead closures. Living in a rural trail town, which is quiet half of the year, she also recognized that there is a firmly established culture and economy that involves second-home owners and tourists, some of whom are her friends; yet she saw them as the vector they posed. Those flashpoints form an ecosystem of human relationships on top of the over-loved White Mountains, and our communities are under stress. Our relationships with the mountains we love are tenuous, even on our best days. Maybe that's why I've felt more comfortable lately in the raw, less formed land of industrial timber. It is an area unclaimed by these formal relationships, almost a returning to the beginning of our trail-based history in the White Mountains. A connection to the mixed and often difficult history of community.

At the end of May, I decided it was time to try Mount Crag again, but only if the parking lot was empty. My companion would be Gemma, one of my main lead dogs who is a loner and prefers going without another dog partner. On a muggy Friday after a brief downpour, chances were good we'd find no one there, and that proved to be right.

But as I took the first few steps, I had mixed feelings. I felt guilty for walking on a trail that I know was being hammered with more use than it could take, and shocked at so much change and difference in the flowers and leaves after eight weeks of absence. More than anything, I felt homesick for Scudder. I wondered what was happening on that logging road just to the east. The next day, I turned back to Scudder with the puppy Skee Ball and an adult, Flora, two dogs who had been communicating that it was their turn for adventures.

We walked over dense green grass on the logging road and through the densest fog of mosquitoes I'd seen. Pushed forward at higher speed, without a reflective moment to stop. The trip to the summit and down took less than

an hour. I wasn't able to fully soak in the stunning clear vista, the valley dried out of moisture and sharpened with green. I had to stay in motion constantly, both hiking and waving my hands. Closing the car door at the end in relief, I realized that the car had become the safe place. Scudder had gotten me back on my feet, and it was time to go somewhere else.

SALLY MANIKIAN has been writing for *Appalachia* since 2008 and is the journal's News and Notes editor. She previously worked for the AMC's Trails Department. She now works for The Conservation Fund in New Hampshire and Vermont and is grateful for the chance to turn from technical grant writing to heart-driven essays here. She lives in Shelburne, New Hampshire, with her disabled brother and sister, her partner Chuck, and the 25 athletes of Shady Pines Sled Dogs.

Going Small

A father and daughter do backyard field research

Dan Szczesny

IN A SMALL PATCH OF CRUMBLY DIRT AND MULCH, NEAR THE WEATHER-worn trellis where the hydrangea had begun to bloom, my 5-year-old daughter, Uma, plucked a beetle off the wood and held it up to the sun.

"Daddy, look Daddy. Isn't she cute?"

"She" was a tiny winter firefly (*Ellychnia corrusca*), that peculiar but common "dark firefly" with the bright red bands. Uma dropped the beetle into her palm and it scuttled up her arm. After a moment, the insect spread its thick, black wings and lifted off. It disappeared over the top of the shed.

"Awww . . ." the tiny entomologist, my child of the garden beasts, said.

"Don't worry," I said. "Look."

Her eyes widened. Spread out up and down the trellis and side of our shed were a dozen fireflies crawling this way and that. The adults hide out under tree bark and can survive subfreezing temperatures. They begin to reemerge