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News and Notes



Walter Graff carrying his daughter, Tasha, on a backcountry ski trip.

COURTESY OF TASHA GRAFF

A Tribute to AMC's Walter Graff from a Daughter He Once Carried to Galehead Hut

When I was about 5 years old, my parents planned a three-day backpacking trip. We would hike to Zealand Falls Hut on the first day, spend the night, and head over to Galehead Hut on the second day, returning home on the third.

Almost three decades later, I don't remember much of the trip, though I am sure my parents nurtured excitement before we embarked on the adventure. As we hiked, my mother would tell us stories, sometimes about a magical fairy (for me) or a mysterious bear (for my brother, Gabriel). My father would hold his hand up and we would freeze like wobbly statues and silence ourselves,

as he pointed upward or sideways, his keen ears picking up the susurrantion of birds in a tree or bush, whispering them out of hiding. The wilderness, for our family, was a place of joy, curiosity, bribery by chocolate, and sometimes, like on that particular trek from Zealand to Galehead, of tears.

Several miles into our journey, the skies opened up and it started to pour. It was too late to turn around, so we forged ahead. My brother, delighted by the new obstacle, ran ahead, leaving splashes of mud and a despondent younger sister in his wake. I am sure I complained every step of the way. Being my father's daughter, I was equipped with rain pants and a rain jacket, but my face was wet with tears and I gave up, refusing to take another step. I don't remember announcing my refusal, though I probably wailed it with all the fervor a kindergartener can muster, frightening nearby creatures. I do remember my dad scooping me up, above his heavy pack. I'm not sure what

he said, but I can guess, from many more years of experience, that it was kind, and perhaps even funny.

For the last precarious mile of the journey, my dad carried me on his shoulders, while singing “You Are My Sunshine” and songs from the “Annie” soundtrack, my favorites—making me forget my tears, my tired legs, and the rain. This small memory represents the three most prominent traits of my father: his love of the outdoors, his endless positivity, and, most importantly, his love of people.

Eleven years before I was born, in July 1974, Walter Graff found himself in Pinkham Notch, freshly hired as a program manager. He grew up in New York City and spent many hours playing baseball in the wilds of Central Park. Somewhere between Manhattan and Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he attended Antioch College, he fell in love with nature.

In his first job at the Appalachian Mountain Club, Walter settled into life in northern New Hampshire, building deep friendships (and ultimately a family) in his newfound home, studying plant, bird, and tree identification books at night to prepare for his job guiding fellow nature enthusiasts around the trails of the White Mountains.

Over the next few decades, Walter built AMC’s outdoor education program. In 1995, Walter was promoted to become AMC’s deputy director, where he worked on the re-permitting process of the huts that AMC operates in the White Mountain National Forest. He also created a stronger tie between AMC and the local community. In 2002, he started to lead the Maine Woods Initiative, his proudest achievement. AMC has purchased and protected 70,000 acres in Maine and laid the groundwork for larger conservation and recreation projects.

For the last decade, in his role as AMC’s senior vice president, Walter continued his work in the Maine Woods, working not only to buy and protect land, but also to open Little Lyford Lodge and Cabins, Gorman Chairback Lodge and Cabins, and Medawisla Lodge and Cabins.

Growing up, I spent many happy hours running around Pinkham with my brother, going on trips with the whole family to the huts (on my own two feet) and, later, to the Maine lodges. I’ve visited the AMC offices in Boston, Portland, Brunswick, and Greenville. I’ve eaten meals at the Highland Center, attended annual meetings, and watched my father make his classic dad jokes in front of a warm crowd. I’ve grown up knowing and loving so many

of his colleagues. And yet. AMC was only a small piece of my childhood. For my dad, for both my parents, AMC was always secondary to our family.

I recognize that many people know my father in different capacities from his 45-year career at AMC, from the long-haired guide in his late 20s to the fundraiser and conservation visionary. People who have worked with my father always talk about his hard work and dedication, his listening ability and his gentle—and



Walter and his daughter Tasha, now grown up.

COURTESY OF TASHA GRAFF

sometimes not-so-gentle—nudges to move a project or idea forward. People tell me about his legacy, they point to maps and permits and projections and acres, and use such words as *perpetuity* and phrases such as *forever wild*.

My dad has worked for AMC for my entire life, but that was not how I described or thought of him as a child. He was and is my dad. The family man with lifelong friendships. The hugger, the pancake maker, the man who easily shed tears, who laughed often, who told me he was proud of me so many times that his voice is etched into my memory, who carried me—literally and metaphorically—through hard times, and celebrated every accomplishment, however large or small, as my brother and I grew up.

For me, for my family, for all those lucky enough to call my dad a friend, his legacy is one of love and kindness. How lucky we all are that he used his career to protect the wilderness and continues to use his life to protect those he loves.

—*Tasha Graff*

TASHA GRAFF is a writer and teacher who lives in Maine.

Lisa Ballard Wins Travel Writing Award for *Appalachia* Article

The Society of American Travel Writers awarded Lisa Ballard its Silver Award (second place) in the Special Purpose category of its 2019 Lowell Thomas travel awards. She won for her story and photos, “Climbers as Humanitarians” (Summer/Fall 2018). Ballard’s story covered a trip to Mexico to help people in the high country after the 2017 earthquake. Team members helped migrants who had been hurt riding trains through Mexico on their way to the United States. The judges wrote, “Ballard’s story, which includes a long climb up a mountain, is filled with humanitarian deeds told in her moving narrative style.”

Since the early 1980s, the Lowell Thomas competition has recognized excellence in the field of travel journalism. The competition awards more than \$20,000 annually in prize money for outstanding print, online, multimedia works, photography, and both audio and video broadcast in various travel-related categories. It is the premier competition in this field, akin to the Pulitzer Prizes for travel journalism. The awards are named for Lowell Thomas, an acclaimed journalist, prolific author, and modern-day world explorer who achieved numerous “firsts” during five decades in travel journalism and whose spirit of adventure and discovery epitomized that of the inquiring travel journalist. This year, there were 1,335 entries in 25 categories, which were judged by 26 faculty members at the Missouri School of Journalism.

—*From press release*

The Night the Land and Water Conservation Fund Was Restored

In the gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives on the evening of February 26, 2019, a handful of nonprofit partners from across the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Coalition sat in gleeful disbelief as we watched the yes votes tick up, up, up on the electronic tote board, as members of Congress and their staffers milled about the massive chamber below. *50 . . . 100 . . . 200 . . . 218, that’s a majority but we need two-thirds to pass tonight under special expedited rules . . . 270, getting close . . . 290!!! We won!! . . . but it’s still going up! . . . 300 . . . 325, wow . . . 350, never thought we’d win so big!! . . . 363 votes in total* for S. 47, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Recreation, and Management Act. That total was 363 bipartisan votes to permanently reauthorize LWCF.

Our joy in this bipartisan vote was only equaled by our shock—so many years of work on the seemingly impossible task of getting Congress to *do*

something, something so critical for the places we love, for parks and trails, for mountains and forests, for clean drinking water and wildlife habitat and playgrounds for kids. And now after watching America's most important conservation and recreation program expire twice in five years, after sweating bullets as we counted down the days, we finally won. And won *by a landslide*.

Of course, we weren't just sitting around idly counting down the days. I worked harder than ever before in my life to save LWCF, rallying partners and stakeholders, land trusts and recreation groups, sportsmen and ranchers, business owners and local officials to all speak with one voice: This program is vital to our communities. You may wonder what Appalachian Mountain Club conservation policy staffers do all day, and how our partners at such groups as the National Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society, The Conservation Fund, Outdoor Industry Association, and countless others do their work to protect the places we love. Well, once in a while we sit and watch Congress vote . . . but every day before that we hustled to make that vote happen.

On February 26, closing in on victory, I accompanied a rafting business veteran, the head of a small land trust, and a Republican county commissioner from an economically depressed corner of West Virginia to meet with representatives about past and future LWCF funding needs to keep building the recreation economy along their world-class rivers. Then I rushed to our "war room" in the Capitol to work the phones with my colleagues, supporting our Congressional champions leading the effort and squashing any potential hints of trouble. I sent mass email blasts to inform more than 1,000 partners in the LWCF Coalition how things were going and what they needed to do to ensure their representatives voted yes. I strategized about which local voices could best help win over swing votes. I wrote a press release and social media posts. I answered everyone's questions from California to New Hampshire and made sure they all stayed on message. I kept massive spreadsheets of all members of Congress, their history of support for LWCF, their key staff contacts, and the latest we'd heard of how they would vote. Even though we were confident of victory that day, you never know what will happen in Congress, and you better keep your eye on the ball, as there are countless ways it can all fall apart.

It took years to build up enough momentum to get to the floor of the House, to create the opportunity to have that crucial vote. Congress has infinite priorities and only so many hours in a day. As manager of the national LWCF Coalition, I spent much time roaming the halls of Congress meeting with lawmakers so that state by state, district by district, they understood the

benefits of this program to their constituents. I refuted misinformation from opponents about how the program works, how it's not a "federal land grab" but a set of tools for communities to choose from and use according to what kind of conservation they need and want. I strategized with DC insiders to get through each specific step in the legislative process and each roadblock we met along the way. I rallied the nationwide troops, spread the word on social media and in the press, and gave a voice to as many local advocates as possible to connect the places they love with an abstract federal program needed to protect them, and then with their members of Congress who needed to make it happen.

And I relied on countless local field staff at AMC and hundreds of partner organizations. For every state and region, there are people who know that place and its people, know the LWCF projects that have successfully protected beloved landscapes and recreation areas, know the places under threat that are waiting for funding and could at any point be lost to development, and know the local members of Congress and their staff. For them, the job is more immediate: They keep their friends and colleagues informed about what's happening in DC, and keep the folks in DC informed about what's happening on the ground. They show the concrete benefits of conservation and recreation to the local economy—in Maine and New Hampshire, that means protection of working forests to protect the water supply and keep jobs in the woods; acquisition of inholdings at Acadia National Park, in the White Mountain National Forest, and along the Appalachian Trail to increase access and prevent incompatible development, spreading out visitors and protecting their experience of these natural wonders; and creation of hundreds of local parks and playgrounds, greenways and bikeways, boat ramps and fishing access points that connect people to the outdoors. There are more than 42,000 stories to tell about the success of the LWCF in protecting the places we love, and through amazing partners in this coalition I have tried to tell as many of them as possible. Now I give back my own success story, not about a beautiful landscape but a map of 435 Congressional districts woven together to #SaveLWCF.

—Amy E. Lindholm

AMY E. LINDHOLM is the LWCF Coalition manager for AMC.

A Ramble in the Alps: Hütte to Hütte

We sat on a terrace that wraps around Dossenhütte. The Swiss alpinist I was talking with casually balanced his stein on the edge of the parapet and went on to describe how last winter he had skied down the face of Rosenlauigletscher. Today, in the summer, that glacier is serrated with crevices as it tumbles off the mountain, and my companion wondered at his own descent.

I couldn't take my eyes off that beer stein. It sat at the edge of a 100-meter plunge into the mist and rocks below. The Swiss have a very casual attitude toward dizzying heights.

While planning my hike, I narrowed my planning to the 153 hüttes of the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC); these most closely resemble the Appalachian Mountain Club's huts in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Each SAC chapter runs its own hüttes, which range from bivouacs to self-service to full service.

Huts are micro communities with norms that help them operate, and I didn't know the Swiss customs. So I approached Gelmerhütte with a bit of uncertainty. In the entranceway was the first obvious hint. One wall was covered with a boot rack, and a second wall was covered with shelves full of foam clogs called Crocs. No boots inside the hut.

I found the "hüttenwarte," the hut warden, and she showed me around, and pointed out my place at one of the communal tables and my place on the sleeping platform, then told me the times for supper and breakfast. The hut itself was built of stone and perched on top of a cliff face, well above the treeline. Below us a mountain stream launched itself over a cliff and nearly disappeared as the wind blew it into a mist.

That evening I shared a table with two women and their three young boys. The boys were buried in their comic books as I practiced my German with their mothers. We ate *backerbsen* (croutons) in a broth soup, salad, mashed potatoes with a pork stew, and for dessert a hard meringue with cream and fruit. At the table in the corner of the room was the only non-Swiss party I met on my ramble, an English family with three generations of rock climbers.

In all the huts I visited we slept in a dormitory, close under the roof. The room had two tiers of sleeping platforms, one at knee level and one at shoulder height. Each platform was covered with a thick foam pad that could accommodate a dozen sleepers. Each place on the pad was provided with a duvet and a pillow. I had come prepared with a "sleep sack," a lightweight sleeping bag.

Breakfast was coffee, muesli, black bread, butter, cheese, and more. Today's hike involved dropping 1,200 meters to the Aare River, then a climb of 1,500 meters to a blank spot on my map.

Hütte wardens are the masters of their valley, so when I was planning my hike and encountered that blank, I emailed the warden at Gaulihütte. She advised me against the pass from Bächlitahütte, but suggested that the high pass over the Grubenjoch was a bit challenging but perfectly reasonable. *Joch* literally means yoke and is a pass, or as a New Englander would say, a gap.

When I expected my trail to vanish, it went from red and white blazes to a very few blue and white splashes. I later learned that these were the marks of "alpinist" or "mountaineer" trails. After a pretty sketchy scramble and an encounter with a ibex, I finally topped the *joch* and the whole of the Gauli basin opened below me. I could see tonight's hütte 3 kilometers west and 1 kilometer below me. At the head of the valley is the Gauli glacier and its many feeders. Below the glacier is a lake, turquoise with "glacial milk," which didn't show on one of my maps, because it has only formed in the last decade as the glaciers have retreated.

I was a bit late, so was happy to make up some time by tobogganing on my back across a few snowfields. I almost made it to dinner on time. I had finished my soup and salad by the time my table companions were dishing up the Chinese chicken and rice.

"So where did you come in from?" they asked me. I told them Gelmerhütte, which surprised them. Surely I meant Grubenhütte? I thought perhaps I had scrambled the names and so pulled out my map. Indeed I had started at Gelmerhütte. What surprised the Swiss wasn't the distance so much as the idea of a point-to-point hike alone. Most guests came to the hütte for a few days and radiated out from here, exploring the glaciers or rock climbing.

That evening I described the AMC huts to my table companions and the hütte staff, and what astonished them the most is that the AMC hut crew would carry in supplies. The next morning I witnessed the Swiss solution. Every other day a helicopter supplies the hütte.

The next morning I sat in the high alpine meadows for an hour, absorbing the sounds of the mountains. These hills are alive with the sound of rushing, cascading, plunging water.

When I finally left the hütte, I filled my water bottle with the traditional *marschtee*—marching tea. This tea is reddish and brewed from rose hips. The Swiss will expound on the virtues of *marschtee*: vitamin C and the energy to take on a steep climb, but I think part of this was derived from the honey that

some hikers added. The tea was offered either hot or cold, and traditionally each hiker is limited to a liter.

As I descended into the valley, I heard sheep bells. It had been springlike at Gaulihütte, but now it was hot, humid, and summerlike in the valley. And then it was time to climb 1,400 meters to Dossenhütte. Every hour I climbed back a month in the season. I passed from forest to grassland to alpine meadows and then through scree, talus, and alluvial, lacelike streams. Blue and white blazes since the valley floor had forewarned me to expect an alpine experience and soon I found myself traversing a cliff face on a very narrow ledge—with a steel cable fixed to the rock.

Dossenhütte was embedded in clouds and rain when I arrived. The hütte warden told me that there had been a number of cancellations because the weather was expected to continue to deteriorate in the next few days. As it was, another pair joined us. They had no desire to descend to the Rosenlauri Glacier in that cloud. The descent, which I would inch my way down tomorrow, was a “via ferrata,” an “iron trail,” with steel cables and ladder rungs mounted to the rock face.

Dinner was remarkable: cucumber and cream cheese on pumpernickel, carrot and ginger soup, an amazing salad. The main course was pasta with a four-cheese sauce and tomatoes. And for dessert, a freshly baked cake. It was the best meal I had in Switzerland. As the hütte warden (a true chef) explained to me, “If you are going to have a helicopter deliver supplies, why not request the best?”

One of the parties that evening was a father in his mid-60s, and his 20-something son and daughter. They had been out on the Rosenlaugletscher that day with ropes, ice axes, and crampons. I think the son and daughter were doing their best to keep their father out of trouble. They told me that at one point, the ice had collapsed under their father and they had to haul him out of a deep crevasse. I got the impression that the children thought the father a little careless. The father shrugged.

He told us that he had been out on a 30-day backcountry ski trip last winter. *Warum tue ich das? Denn wenn ich das tue, weiss ich, dass ich lebe, he told us.* They translated for me, “Why do I do this? Because when I do this, I know I am alive.”

—*Timothy P. Smith*