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The Last Gift

Months before a father's tragic death, he encourages his son to seek challenges

Douglass P. Teschner



AS A YOUNG BOY, I LOVED SUMMER CAMP BUT WAS MUCH LESS SURE about climbing mountains. Perhaps this hesitation started when I was in the Cub Scouts in my hometown of Westborough, Massachusetts; when we hiked up little Mount Wachusett, it seemed so hard, so long. But at age 13, thanks to my father, I gained a whole new perspective that would have a profound impact on my life.

In 1960, at age 10, I had been sent by my parents to the Worcester YMCA Camp Blanchard in Sutton, Massachusetts, for two weeks. The counselor said I would never see my family again as the Russians were going to send a nuclear missile any day, but I got over that soon enough and loved the camp experience. Camp was pretty magical—all those fun activities, mostly outdoors, and the camaraderie and bonding with a bunch of boys my age. I sent home a proud postcard when I was named officer of the day.

I went back to Camp Blanchard every summer for five more years after that first one, but, in 1963, I was nervous anticipating the coming fourth summer. The 13- and 14-year-olds lived in tents in “Woodsmen’s Village” on the edge of camp and went on infamous backpacking trips to the distant White Mountains. I was intimidated by stories I had heard of those tough climbs and told my parents I preferred to “stay back,” living in a normal cabin with the 12-year-olds, even if I was older.

The day my parents dropped me off at camp, my father wandered off unexpectedly. When he caught up with mother and me later in the day, dad said that he had been to Woodsmen’s Village and really thought that was where I belonged. I acquiesced and made the move. As my father predicted, I fit in fine and, a week or so later, we campers were on our way to the Whites, under the leadership of the legendary Bill Chandler.

To transport the kids, camp had a big flatbed truck. After putting wooden slats on the side, all the rucksacks were loaded, then the campers climbed on top and off we went in the open air! I know today’s vans with seat belts are a lot safer, but certainly not as much fun (except when it rained and we were forced to inhale serious exhaust fumes trapped under a canvas tarp).

The first day in the mountains was easy, a flat mile to Dry River Shelter Number 1, where we thrived, skinny dipping in the refreshing pools. Some

The author—on a 1965 hike in the Great Gulf below Mount Washington—became a backpacker because of early encouragement from his father.

COURTESY OF DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

slept in the shelter, and the rest buttoned together army surplus shelter halves to form crude two-person tents with no ends or floor. At breakfast, we all waited our turn for a pancake as the frying pan on the camp fire (no one used camp stoves much back then) only made one at a time. Eventually we were packed up and headed off, over the suspension bridge toward Dry River Shelter Number 2, four miles distant. Back then, before they rerouted the trail to improve safety, there were seven challenging river crossings that required leaping from rock to rock.

Chandler, our leader, had a much-admired homemade aluminum pack frame with an attached plywood box for his belongings. The campers were issued canvas army surplus rucksacks with internal steel frames. I had brought from home a simple Boy Scout aluminum frame pack (with a small canvas bag), which had much less space than the army surplus models the other campers were using. With no room in my pack, I was assigned to carry a loaf of French bread in the sweatshirt pouch across my stomach. At one of the difficult river crossings, I handed the bread across to a fellow camper, but it broke and fell into the river, a total loss.

I was convinced we must have somehow missed the lean-to as we had surely walked more than 4 miles. Then there appeared a trail sign that we had gone only 2 miles! That was my introduction to distance in the mountains. Eventually we reached Dry River Shelter Number 2 on a small island and set up camp. The next day we summited Mount Washington, and I remember well the mystical feeling of being above treeline for the first time and looking way down at the Cog Railway base station that I had visited several years before with my grandparents on a weekend White Mountain road trip. On the fourth day, we triumphantly hiked back to Crawford Notch and took the truck back to camp where we proclaimed our mountain success!

I was having so much fun in Woodsmen's Village that I wrote my parents to ask if I could stay for the final two weeks of the summer; fortunately, they agreed, and camp had space. As was the Chandler tradition, we made another White Mountains trip, this time setting up a base at Dolly Copp Campground near Pinkham Notch. Our first attempt at Mount Washington was aborted in Tuckerman Ravine by an epic thunderstorm. The day after, we were successful, climbing through the mist via Boott Spur.

The next day, we packed up the truck and headed south toward camp, but somewhere, perhaps in Intervale, Chandler pulled off the road and announced that, this being the final camp session that summer, it would be our last look back at the White Mountains that year. In that instant, a powerful feeling

welled up inside me, like nothing I had ever felt before. I just knew I would be back. I was hooked.

THE FOLLOWING WINTER, MY FATHER WAS KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT IN Swanzy, New Hampshire, while on a business trip with his boss. My mother was left alone to raise three young boys. The Westborough community rallied around us in a special way that I only came to fully appreciate many years later.

The next summer, 1964, I was back at camp for a fifth year, but much to my dismay after dreaming of mountains all winter, Chandler was gone. Fortunately, one of the new Woodsmen's Village counselors, Brian Fowler, was a hiker, but I still had to convince others that a mountain trip was preferable to the planned beach outing. Brian led several of us up over the Kinsmans, my second and third 4,000-footers. At Lonesome Lake Hut, I bought my first Appalachian Mountain Club *White Mountain Guide*, which I studied intently thereafter, dreaming about future mountain adventures.

I didn't know anyone in my town who was a hiker, except for another high school friend also not yet of driving age, but Fowler told us about the Worcester Chapter of the AMC. I made the connection and began going on chapter hikes during the school year—including helping Cecil Jones and others build the first trail up North Hancock, bypassing an unpleasant landslide previously used for the ascent.

In 1965, at 15, I was back at Camp Blanchard for the sixth and final summer, hired to be on the kitchen dish crew: \$100 for the summer plus a \$10 bonus! At the cost of giving up my remaining days off, I talked my way on to a backpack trip to the Great Gulf and Mount Washington. I was beginning to almost feel like a veteran hiker. I soon acquired a much cherished Kelty pack, my first pair of real hiking boots from Asa C. Osborn in Boston, and got the two signatures needed back then to officially join the Appalachian Mountain Club. By November 1966, with the help of the Worcester Chapter, I had bagged all 46 New Hampshire 4,000-footers. (Galehead and Bondcliff were added later to make today's 48.)

I graduated from high school in 1967 and then worked as a counselor at another Worcester YMCA facility, Camp Morgan in Washington, New Hampshire. On a day off, two other camp staffers and I hiked up the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail to visit my former counselor, Brian Fowler, who was working as a croo member at Lakes of the Clouds Hut. We camped right in the krummholz—perfectly legal back then!—and ate breakfast with the croo.

The huts looked like great fun, living and working in the mountains all summer, so Fowler suggested I apply to work on the hut closing crew after camp finished up for the season. Huts manager Bruce Sloat wouldn't accept me at first because I would have to start classes at the University of Massachusetts sooner than he wanted. I wrote another letter that proved convincing, offering to work for only room and board. I was thrilled to head to Pinkham Notch and became part of hut camaraderie, if only for a couple of weeks, carrying iron bars to Zealand that would secure the winter shutters. (The huts closed right after Labor Day back then.) This led to three summers in the huts during my college years. I worked in 1968 and 1970 at my favorite Zealand Falls Hut, and in 1969, the summer of Woodstock and the moon landing, I was assigned to Mizpah Spring Hut.

A growing craving for challenge and adventure led next to joining the Peace Corps. A new college graduate, I was sent to do forestry work in Morocco, which opened my horizons to international work and travel, including many mountain adventures in Africa, Europe, and throughout North America in subsequent years.

None of these things would have happened if I hadn't joined those older campers in Woodsmen's Village back at age 13. It is hard to imagine what a different path my life probably would have taken and who I might be today. My father was only 38 when he died in 1964, a loving, caring man who gave me so much as a child. But convincing me to go to Woodmen's Village in 1963 is the special gift I remember the most.

DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER of Pike, New Hampshire, mentioned this story to *Appalachia* editor Christine Woodside, who insisted he write it up as a kind of prequel to the many adventures he has published in this journal over the past five decades (most recently "Africa Mountain Journal: 1971–2015" in the Winter/Spring 2017 issue). Teschner was the guest speaker at the AMC Worcester Chapter's 100th anniversary kickoff dinner in November 2017, which he called "a special opportunity to thank them for getting me into the mountains as a kid after summer camp had given me that first spark."