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## Mount Washington's Quirky Record Holder: A Writer Follows the Intensity of Alton Weagle

Dan Szczesny

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# Mount Washington's Quirky Record Holder

*A writer follows the intensity of Alton Weagle*

**Dan Szczesny**



I WAIT NEAR THE BEGINNING OF NEW HAMPSHIRE'S MOUNT WASHINGTON Auto Road, dressed as Walt Whitman, about to attempt to set the record for the first person to hike up the road reading poetry.

I think about the man who inspired crazy records on the mountain, and my own crazy adventure and those of the other people with me, after which Alton Weagle Day is named. I wonder what sort of man would decide to run up the mountain backward. Or blindfolded. How did he even come up with the idea of pushing a wheelbarrow full of sugar all the way up without setting it down?

As I scan the Alton Weagle Day class on May 27, 2017, that answer becomes less important. We gather early on the morning of the climb, under the huge Auto Road sign where Route 16 meets a gigantic parking lot, nineteen souls eager to try our hand at making it into the silly record books.

A man dressed as the Cat in the Hat waits with two young ones, Thing One and Thing Two. Two unicorns, one fairy, and one Hawaiian princess fiddle with horn, skirt, and tiara, respectively. Superman and Superwoman smooth their red and blue costumes, and a unicyclist stares nervously up at the steep Auto Road slope. He says he plans to juggle as he rides, but he laughs when I ask him about it, saying, "Well, I didn't realize the grade was so pronounced!"

A man prepares to drive his remote control car up the mountain, and a woman waits before starting her walk up while carrying a giant dream catcher.

Finally, I see a woman dressed as a nurse intent on pushing a wheelchair with an eight-foot stuffed rabbit for a patient. I feel Weagle would have been particularly proud to have inspired this last one. Hers is clearly the most nonsensical stunt of the day.

My own record attempt is part of a yearlong journey of exploration on Mount Washington. I have visited the notches; snowshoed off the mountain in a nor'easter; and ridden the shuttle, the Cog Railway, a Snow Cat, a Mini Cooper (during Minis on Top day), and a motorcycle (during the Ride to the Sky). I have been part of the team that helped a 97-year-old run up the mountain. I have weeded the summit of dandelions in the fog, and I've watched World War II veterans cry upon reaching the summit for the first time. I've spent a glorious week in mid-April as a volunteer for the

*Betting that no one else had ever done it, Dan Szczesny reads from Leaves of Grass while walking up the Mount Washington Auto Road.* COURTESY OF DAN SZCZESNY

Mount Washington Observatory, living at the summit, where I interviewed scientists, cooked for the winter crew, and attempted to walk outdoors in 86-mile-an-hour winds. I am writing a book on these experiences. And here I stand, ready to channel the enthusiasms of Alton Weagle, who used to be called Mr. Mount Washington.

I HAPPEN TO KNOW THAT THE VIEW FROM THE 7-MILE POST OF THE Mount Washington Auto Road is the most magnificent of any near the summit. To the north, the great granite mounds of the Northern Presidentials surge up, and the plunging Great Gulf seems to lift Mounts Adams, Jefferson, and Madison higher than their 5,000-plus feet. The summit towers of the Mount Washington Observatory and the hulk of the other summit buildings rise from the south. It's stunning, but I see none of this. I peer into my copy of *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman, and read out loud:

Scaling mountains . . . pulling myself cautiously up . . . holding on by low  
scragged limbs,/Walking the path worn in the grass and beat through the  
leaves of the brush.

My right hand holds open my paperback copy of one of the most famous long poems in the world, while my left hand secures my wide-brimmed, black felt hat to my head. The cool Canadian northwest wind has already whisked it away more than once.

I'm so lost in Whitman's words that I don't even hear the ultrarunner overtaking me. He asks, "Did you lose your way looking for the subway?"

"What?" I ask, watching him pass in his black headband, sleeveless jersey, and yellow tights as he huffs his way up the mountain.

"The subway," he calls back over his shoulder. "You look like you belong in the city."

This thrills me. I think it would have pleased Whitman, too, and maybe even Weagle.

It has been a long road of discovery to get me nearly to the summit of this mountain dressed like a nineteenth-century poet, on a day meant to celebrate a twentieth-century mountain man. My goal was to bridge the gap between the two men, to bring their souls of exploration together on this climb—and in the process, I hoped, shine a little more light on Mr. Mount Washington, Alton Weagle, the hike-guiding, drum-playing,

square dance—calling, horseshoe-throwing baker and mountain watchtower guard who holds the most records for Mount Washington ascents.

In the mid-1930s, Weagle raced the Cog Railway car to the top, on foot, and won. Another time, he climbed the mountain three times in one day via trail, road, and Cog tracks. This is the guy who once walked up the mountain blindfolded, another time barefoot, and another time backward.

Most famously, Weagle is the guy who once pushed a wheelbarrow full of sugar all the way up the Auto Road without ever setting it down.

My own road, the one that led me here, chasing my own ridiculous record in memory of Weagle in the persona of Walt, began in the Nash Stream Valley, in a village so tiny it has no stop sign: Stark, New Hampshire.

ALTON OSCAR WEAGLE WAS BORN IN STARK ON APRIL 18, 1911. WEAGLE'S father, Jason Henry Weagle, a laborer, abandoned the family soon thereafter.

Weagle's mother, Nina Elizabeth Montgomery, divorced Jason Weagle and made some hard decisions so that she could support her family. She kept Alton's younger brother, James, and sent Alton to live with his grandmother Manettie, who also lived in Stark. Apparently this had no ill effect on Alton, primarily because the two main women in his life, his grandmother and his mother, were deeply self-reliant, each the head of her own family in a difficult rural setting. Manettie had to deal with raising Alton, of course, a young rascally child who spent more time in the river or the woods than indoors. But Manettie also had three other children of her own, beside Nina: three teenage uncles and aunts who became Alton's *de facto* siblings.

And Nina? Her legacy can be seen in the thousands of images every year that artists and photographers around the world take of Stark's famous Paddleford truss covered bridge. In fact, from a rise at the very back row of Stark Cemetery, the family plot sits with a grand view of the elegant, 151-foot white wooden bridge as it crosses the river. Built around 1860, the bridge washed away in a flood in 1890, but men with oxen pulled it back upriver, added extra arches, and refastened it to its pilings. The bridge failed again, and in the mid-1950s, the people of Stark voted to tear it down and replace it with a steel trestle. But Nina was having none of that.

By that time, Weagle's mother had earned her place as a village elder. For years she served as the Stark station agent, ticket master, and postmistress, and that bridge was her view every day as she managed the passengers and rail men who worked the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railway—a line that passed through Stark on its route between Montreal, Canada, and Portland, Maine.

When her fellow villagers voted to take down the bridge, Nina must have felt a stab in the back. She sent notices to covered bridge aficionados, artists, and friends and declared she would drag her kitchen stove under the span, setting up residence there to prevent the bridge's destruction. The vote was rescinded, and a new motion carried to renovate the bridge instead. A concrete pier was added, along with steel stringers for support. Nina died in 1960 without ever having to live under her beloved bridge.

In Nina Montgomery (the name she used most; she was Mrs. Weagle only briefly), I discovered my first clue into the character of her son, the man who would make Mount Washington the palette of his life, relentlessly pursuing the nobility of the aesthetic.

AS I WAIT NEAR THE START OF THE AUTO ROAD FOR THE ANNUAL Alton Weagle Day to begin, trying to settle into my Walt Whitman character, I think about what an unusual man Weagle was. Like his mother, he discovered and followed passions—tokens that connected them to community and place. It seems right that I'm dressed as Whitman today, even though the poet died nineteen years before Weagle was born. For his part, Whitman was fascinated by the pursuit of creative impulse, and he didn't care what form that pursuit took.

At a talk Whitman gave at the Brooklyn Art Union in 1851, four years before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published, he laid out his grand vision on the character of heroics. He insisted all heroic action and impulses that improve life—empathy, love, joy—are strictly derived from the artistic impulse.

"He who does great deeds," Whitman said, "does them from his sensitiveness to moral beauty."

What could be more moral and beautiful than the preservation of a crucial structure that literally spans a waterway and figuratively spans the history of a small New England village? To Nina, that bridge wasn't wood and concrete. That bridge was—is—the moral fiber of her home.

Alton Weagle's moral beauty would be a little grander and a little taller.

THE MOUNT WASHINGTON AUTO ROAD, A PRIVATELY OWNED ENTITY, launched Alton Weagle Day in 2011 to celebrate its sesquicentennial. Only six participants attempted records that year. The Auto Road's general manager, Howie Wemyss, tells me the road inspired record breakers even at its beginning, in 1805, as a carriage road.



"The road has always attracted people who have wanted to challenge it in some way," he says. "Consequently, we have quite a history of accepting and even encouraging folks to find their personal challenge here on Mount Washington."

Wemyss is a legend in his own right in White Mountain hiking circles. Today he is dressed as a Scottish gentleman, in a kilt. He planned on "pursuing" his wife up the mountain. She's dressed as a hobbyhorse Loch Ness Monster.

I think about my own decision to participate as Whitman. It was born out of a 36-second wax-cylinder recording of the poet reading from his poem "America," which I first heard in 2016. In mid-1951, an NBC Radio program, "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," played the recording. There's no reference in anything Whitman or his colleagues wrote about making this recording, but a letter from Thomas Edison survived, in which Edison expressed interest in making the cylinder. It apparently was put to wax around 1890, when Whitman was in his 70s, living as a hermit in Camden, New Jersey. Voice analysts and sound engineers have happily debated ever since whether it's actually Whitman or not.

I don't know whether Weagle heard the recording back in 1951—or whether he read Whitman. I do know Weagle, too, wrote poetry. Over the years, he struck up a friendship with William Loeb, the powerful and controversial publisher of New Hampshire's *Union Leader* newspaper. Loeb published many of Weagle's poems, most of which praised his home state.

In "New Hampshire," an 11-verse ode the New Hampshire



*Alton Weagle setting out on one of his record-breaking climbs.* COURTESY OF BARBARA WEAGLE

tourist board would have been proud to publish, Weagle doesn't shy away from heavy-handed rhyme:

If you like to swim, hike: camp or ski  
There are plenty each for you and me.  
From Mt. Washington, with its beautiful view  
To the deep virgin forests where song birds coo.

Like nearly everything else Weagle did, he wrote poetry with a childlike earnestness, oblivious to anything but celebration and joy.

He had that in common with Whitman. And those 36 seconds, back in the summer of 2016, just as I had begun to track down the ghost of Weagle, was what convinced me that my own record attempt would be in the persona of Whitman.

Sitting on my bed late one night, I played that recording on my smartphone: from wax to microchip, with 125 years between us. Behind the haunting crackle and fuzz of that early marvel of sound engineering, there he was, that old man with the long beard, the elder statesman of American letters. I hope Weagle heard it or knew of Whitman. I will choose to believe he did.

How else to explain Weagle's wanderlust, his connection to the mountains, his almost transcendental desire to use his flesh and bone to forge a bond between himself and the landscape, much as Whitman did in New York City?

I decided that night I would try to become the first person ever to climb Mount Washington dressed as Whitman, reading poetry. I would meld Whitman's words with Weagle's actions on Alton Weagle Day.

WHITMAN'S HAUNTING VOICE PLAYS OVER IN MY MIND AS A GROUP OF us gathers in front of the Auto Road sign for photos. The air feels warm, but we know that on the summit fog and clouds have moved in. I'm worried that I'll freeze above treeline; I don't know how wool and corduroy will make me feel up high.

There is no stress, no feeling of competitive angst, in the air. Weagle once told a newspaper reporter who'd asked why he decided to set such curious records, "I like to do things that no one has ever done before." That seems about right.

A mini cannon boom signals the beginning of the climb. But as the sound of the shot echoes through the valley, no one runs, no one hurries. Instead, we



all wish each other well, pat each other on the back, and slowly make our way to the gatehouse. As the road begins to slant up, we walk, ride, navigate, run, and push—some slowly, some quickly, all of us laughing at how wonderfully absurd such a thing is.

I enter the forest, open *Leaves of Grass*, and begin to read to the mountain.

I'M SITTING AT THE NORTH COUNTRY FAMILY RESTAURANT IN GROVETON, sipping steaming burnt coffee cheerfully given to me by a thin waitress with sunburned cheeks and platinum hair. In a corner, two men with identical beards and identical wrinkles around their eyes—one wearing a baseball cap that proclaims his Navy service—talk politics, and the talk in Groveton, like always, is jobs, or rather the lack of them.

When the Wausau Paper mill shut down for good in 2008, the trains stopped coming, and then the people stopped coming. Now tourists driving along Route 3 from the mountain notches to the south, or from Canada to the north, look out their windows at Groveton and see nothing but piles of red brick bones and brown shuttered windows. They shake their heads and drive a little faster through town.

As of 2010, just over 1,100 souls lived in Groveton, and nearly 15 percent were living below the poverty line.

The person I'm here to meet wants all that to change. I slide a few bucks' tip under my coffee mug and make my way down the puddle-filled sidewalk to meet Jim Weagle, the great-nephew of Alton. Jim is a selectman in Groveton. This tiny former mill town has always been his home. He's never left.

I meet Jim at an intersection across from the town hall. His wife works as a crossing guard there. He's leaning against a street sign as I approach, blue jean jacket over a hoodie, salt-and-pepper hair and beard.

Jim Weagle also serves as fire precinct commissioner, Groveton Elementary's PTO chair, a member of the Northern Gateway Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Lancaster Renaissance committee, the town's planning board, and the school board.

"I keep very busy," he says. "Come on, let's walk. I'm getting my son from school."

We head south down the main street, dodging mud and puddles. Jim walks with a pronounced limp, and I try to be casual as I ask about it, not knowing if he's willing to talk. But he's fine. He worked on a sanitation truck

when he was 20. Jim lost his grip, fell off, and was run over by the truck's back wheels.

"They told me they'd never seen a crush injury like that," he says. "Told me I'd never walk again. That was twenty years ago, and here I am." He smiles.

"Are you still in pain?" I ask him stupidly.

"Every day," he says. "Every moment."

I remember reading in an old article that Alton Weagle had a glass eye. He lost the real one playing with a dynamite cap when he was 14 years old. That injury kept Alton out of the military during World War II. I very nearly mention Alton's glass eye but resist the urge to make conversation by comparing injuries. Instead, I ask: "How did that injury affect your head? How did you manage to be able to come back and work so hard?"

Jim shrugs. "I've been back to work a little bit here and there," he says. "After the injury, I felt sorry for myself for a time, but I remember some teachers I had back in school that got me interested in politics, so that's what I did. I can't really work but I want to contribute."

Having one eye certainly didn't stop Alton, either.

"Do you remember much about Alton?" I ask.

"I do remember my mom saying that he always had some new thing he was doing."

I press him a bit.

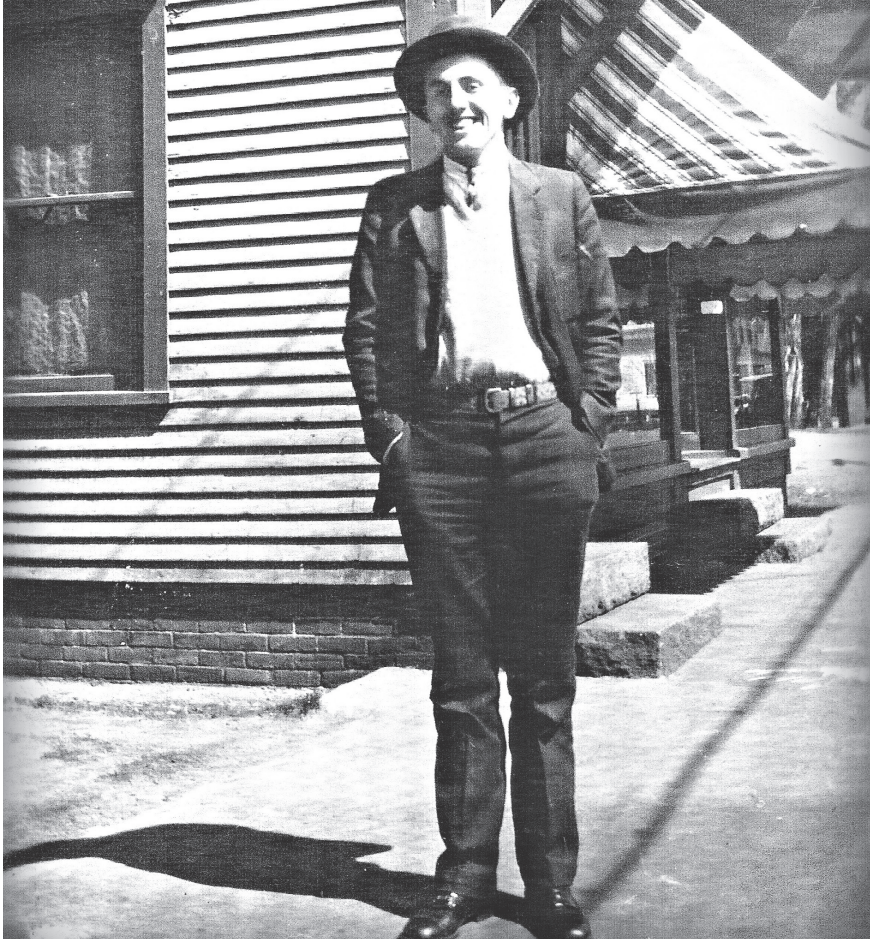
"He wanted to be known, I think," Jim says. "My guess is that, a lot of time, people told him he couldn't do this or that, and he wanted to show them otherwise."

Jim's son comes running up, and they greet with a fist bump; then all three of us begin the walk back to the intersection.

We chat a little more. Jim points out some of the former mill property and mentions ideas he has for getting Groveton back on its feet. Even broken as it is, Groveton has a sort of lost-world charm—the sort of place where old, bald men make weekly trips to the local barbershop and Pink Floyd plays through warbling speakers at the tiny grocery store.

I begin to understand that, ultimately, the connection between Jim and his mom's uncle may not be about family. I came to Groveton looking for family ties, but as it turns out, the great wandering soul of Alton may have been forged in geography, in the mill where Alton worked, in the nearby hills where he cut his teeth as a mountain guide.

Alton's great-nephew is tethered to his home community, his love of the ground under his feet, in good times and bad. But Alton felt that connection



*Alton Weagle as a young man. He could have inherited his exuberance from his collecting family.* COURTESY OF BARBARA WEAGLE

differently, through constant movement. Alton's connection to the hills drove him to achieve obsessively, even if that achievement seemed insane to some.

My first real insight into the heart of what drove Alton Weagle was waiting for me a few blocks away, in a nondescript, white clapboard apartment building with two faded cardboard pink flamingos pinned to the front door.

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE AS I STEP INTO BARBARA WEAGLE'S HOME IS the sound of a thousand toy sun dancers clicking in unison. They line every inch of space along every window. The eastern sun beats down through the windows and lights them up. They plink and rock, so many small noises forming a trinkety heartbeat. Barbara's home is a living metronome.

“Watch where you step,” Alton’s niece says, as I enter the doorway where the pink flamingos are pinned. “I haven’t had the chance to clean up.”

Her house, where she has lived since 1977, is packed floor to ceiling with amazing collections of tchotchkes and artifacts from around the world. Commemorative plates, primarily of churches, line the walls. Wind chimes dangle from every corner of the ceiling. There are magnets; pictures of family and places; thousands of VHS tapes and DVDs; homages to Elvis, the Beatles and “Star Trek”; and, lining a sofa covered with a thick, colorful afghan, dozens of stuffed animals.

“Wow,” I say out loud, unable to conceal my wonder. “Look at the spoons.”

But there is no need to feign nonchalance. “Oh, yes,” Barbara says. “Would you like to see them? Come on!”

Barbara is comfortable, calm, and happy in her little museum home, curator of the joy and contentment that comes with being surrounded by the spinning colors of her life. She sits on the long sofa, nearly the only surface unoccupied by a collection, and smiles under her spoons, queen of collections, archivist of Groveton.

“My mother used to say that my grandmother was a hoarder,” Barbara says cheerfully. This is Nina she’s talking about, Alton’s mom. “But that’s not it. It’s collecting. Just about anything you give me, I’ll collect.” There is an innocent exuberance in Barbara that draws me in, fills me with wonder. The colors alone of her home dare you to write her off as a North Country rube. I like her from the moment I walk in.

Born in 1948, after Alton had set most of his endurance records and had already moved away, from Stark to Walpole, Barbara remembers her uncle mainly through her father, Alton’s brother James. Barbara and James worked in the mill, of course. In fact, if I peer between the sun catchers lining the east-facing window of her home, the great open space where the mill used to sit is a constant reminder of her past and, perhaps, her future.

It must have been like a record wall of her life, right outside her window, brick by brick, coming down until all that remained was open, empty space. To some, the removal of that mill might signal rebirth. But to the Weagles, that open plot might as well be a giant grave.

Barbara worked at the mill as a checker, which was exactly what it sounds like. As the paper inventory came off the line and before it went out the door, Barbara’s job was to inspect and tag the items on their way out. It was solid North Country work, something she was proud to be a part of. Every day she’d come home to her family, her knickknacks, and her spoons.

I search in my memory for some Whitman parallel and can't find it. But as Barbara begins to talk about her uncle, so much more becomes clear, and I finally realize the truth about Alton's Mount Washington obsession was right there in front of me all along. I just didn't see it.

"THE TIMES I SAW HIM, HE WAS ALREADY NOT LIVING HERE, SO WHEN he did come up, he was always bragging about the stuff he was doing," Barbara says. "My father would always say, 'Here comes the old bullshitter!'"

We both have a good laugh at this, but when I ask her about those records—the blindfold, the Cog race, the wheelbarrow full of sugar—she shrugs. "I don't know."

"Do you have any pictures of him chasing these records?"

She shakes her head. "He did them alone."

Wait a minute. Over the course of the next few days, I ask Howie from the Auto Road. I ask Jim, the selectman and Alton's great-nephew. I consult the town archives, the history books. We go through photos. Those records that for years have been reported in newspapers and whispered in hiking circles. Those records that spurred Alton Weagle Day, that created a White Mountain industry of Mount Washington challenges. Those records that gave me so much depth and pleasure and joy as I donned my own Walt Whitman outfit to walk in the footsteps of Weagle.

The only person, it appeared, who ever recorded those records was Alton Weagle.

"Barbara," I begin, almost not wanting to ask the obvious question, "did Alton actually set those records?"

She smiles, and her eyes shine. "He said he did."

Was I chasing a character instead of an actual man? A myth? I'd find the answer halfway up Mount Washington's west slope, at a place called Jacob's Ladder, where the most documented and famous of Weagle's records took place.

WITH A HALF-MILE TO GO, I AM SWEATING AND FREEZING IN TURNS NEAR the summit. The heavy peacoat had to come off down below, but I've put it back on as a deep and foggy wind kicks up, whips along the relatively even cow pasture, and sneaks under my damp shirt. I have to put away my Whitman hat and pull a stocking cap over my ears to keep my head warm. I justify this breach of costume—along with my modern hiking boots—by thinking that, had Walt had such outdoor-appropriate wear when he was walking, he'd have approved.



I first climbed Mount Washington in 2000, with no previous hiking or climbing experience. My mentor, the great “seven summits” climber Jim Gagne, had to use all the tricks in his magic hiking bag to get me up there, in early spring, with ice and snow on the summit. We headed up in the dark. We got back down in the dark. I could not get out of bed the next morning.

I touched the Mount Washington summit sign for the first time as the sun began to set behind me. I was so tired, but there was nowhere else I wanted to be at that moment. Fifteen years and a new summit sign later, there is still no place I’d rather be.

Since that first climb, I’ve made it up by various means perhaps twenty times, or about once a year since I arrived in New Hampshire. Weagle, on the other hand, claimed to have climbed Mount Washington 531 times by the time he was 44. That would be once a month, every month, since he was one month old.

And all this—the records day, the path through Groveton and Stark, the covered bridge and the mill, indeed the very words you read right now—might have been lost to history. Alton Oscar Weagle might have slipped quietly into obscurity were it not for a stunt he pulled on September 10, 1955. For all of his (mostly) self-proclaimed accomplishments on Mount Washington, the one record that brought Weagle into the public eye, that received media attention throughout New England and that landed him his nickname, Mr. Mount Washington, took place about 4,800 feet up on the mountain’s west side.

Named by the famed early settler Ethan Allen Crawford, the section of the Cog Railway known as Jacob’s Ladder has a steepest grade of 37 percent. It was at the very top of this trestle, on a cool but clear September morning, that Weagle and his new bride, Cora Carter, became the first couple to get married on the Cog Railway.

The railway smelled a public-relations bonanza and helped Weagle in designing the event, not to mention publicizing it heavily. So heavily, in fact, that this event propelled Weagle into the national limelight. Dozens of newspapers covered the wedding, and the public learned about most of Weagle’s records then.

In fact, Weagle’s own local newspaper, the *Keene Sentinel*, opened its story on the wedding with the following less than epic line: “Alton O. Weagle, well known Keene square dance caller, will be married Saturday.” And while I was thrilled to learn that among all of his other talents, he was also a square dance caller, I was disappointed to see that Weagle’s climbing records mostly took a back seat.



But Weagle and the Cog aimed to change that and went all in for the wedding. Weagle was interviewed again and again, and over and over he repeated his records to eager newspaper reporters. The Cog named the car used for the wedding the Honeymoon Special and fixed a banner to its side for photographers. They had the Cog park in the middle of the trestle, with the steam engine stopped to add to the solemnity of the event.

The Cog reserved an entire 44-seat car for the wedding, and in the end, 38 of those seats ended up being the wedding party. Everyone wanted a piece of the publicity. Mayor Laurence Pickett of Keene was a member of the party, along with two councilmen. The former New Hampshire governor Hugh Gregg sent a congratulatory note, which was read. The Cog Railway's manager, Arthur Teague, made the trip himself. Weagle invited as guests of honor Mr. and Mrs. James Main of Groveton, who, in 1941, had become the first couple to get married at the summit of Mount Washington.

Practically lost in all the hoopla was the new Mrs. Weagle, whom Alton had met while working as a driver for the Cheshire Beef Company. Cora Carter, whose first husband had died, is quoted only once in all of the writing about the wedding, saying she was "very much excited" about the event. She baked her own wedding cake, a three-tiered fruitcake that was served at the summit reception on Mount Washington after the Cog ride.

In this final act on Mount Washington—the 1955 wedding appears to have been his last on the peak—Weagle finally purged the mountain from his soul. But he wasn't finished setting records. He went on to found the Keene Horse-shoe Club in 1957, organized a large square dance on Keene's Main Street, worked as a fire tower guard on Mount Monadnock, and donated more than 50 pints of blood to the American Red Cross. While these later chapters in his life are stories for another day, far removed from Mount Washington, they provide examples of Weagle's endless desire to turn the mundane into the truly unforgettable.

THE WEATHER UP HERE IS LESS THAN IDEAL. A FOGGY MIST ROLLS UP OVER the Tip-Top House and seems to cascade down onto the summit cone, a swirling gray blob of air. I am sweat-soaked through and through, and clearly a bit dehydrated and dry-mouthed from reading aloud to the mountain.

I'm only about 10 vertical feet from the actual summit, but I hesitate to make that last walk.

I think about how many times Weagle was up here, how—when he was taking tourists to the top via the Cog—he would put them on the train and

pocket his ride share, running alongside all the way up to make a little extra cash. This place, this holy place, gave Weagle life, energized him, tested him. Mount Washington gave him a reason to be Alton Weagle.

All that despite the tourism, the hot dogs at the concession stand, the cars and shuttles and motorcycles. All that despite the “damn fools” Weagle recalled helping to rescue.

I bunch up my collar and smile pleasantly at the few people who look sideways at me. I stick out up here, of course, but perhaps not as much as the tourists who are wandering around at 6,288 feet, freezing in shorts and T-shirts because it was 70 degrees at the base when they started up.

Weagle’s love affair with this mountain to me seemed identical to Whitman’s love affair with New York. The poet took long constitutionals—he called them saunters—aimlessly seeking out signs of the lifeblood of his city, much as Weagle sought personal epiphany from the rocks, trails, and elevation of this mountain.

Whitman would sit for hours in one place, watching and writing about the hectic lifestyle of those who passed him by, people who “run after steam boats, with hats flying off and skirts streaming behind!”



*The wind blew off his Walt Whitman hat, but the author keeps reading.*

COURTESY OF DAN SZCZESNY

That was just like what I was doing now, watching tourists rushing to the museum to buy a refrigerator magnet, shivering in line to get their picture taken next to the summit sign, or dropping their quarters into a tower viewer to try to find some distant landmark.

And then it occurred to me: Both Weagle and Whitman didn't find revelation in spite of the rushing of people; they found it because of the crowds. Walt loved standing out, proclaiming his witness to the heartbeat of America, not just in New York but among all living things. And Weagle loved showing off, not to be boastful but because he wanted others to feel about this place like he did—and he didn't care if those people were his family, hikers, or tourists.

Both men created their own passions and then lived them unapologetically.

I take a long, deep breath in the swirling mist, the mountain air tinged with the fumes of the nearby shuttle exhaust. I stand and begin to read:

My left hand hooks you round the waist,  
My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.  
Not I, nor anyone can travel that road for you,  
You must travel it for yourself.  
It is not far . . . it is within reach.

The tourists seem to move aside as I climb the final few feet, parting as if a madman is passing. My voice grows stronger as I attain the summit; the two souls of Alton and Walt feel comfortable in my breath, like the three of us are sharing the same lofty air here above New England.

I run my fingers over the damp summit sign, the deep groove that forms the “W” in Washington. I look around. There is no view, and perhaps that's as it should be. People are waiting, watching me.

“All done,” I say to the spirits, as I shut *Leaves of Grass* and head off to find a shuttle down.

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DAN SZCZESNY moved to New Hampshire in 2000 to cover the presidential election for the Associated Press—and stayed. He writes fiction and nonfiction. His books include *Mosquito Rain* (Folded Word, 2016) about Alaska; *The Nepal Chronicles* (Hobblebush Books, 2014), about his marriage in Kathmandu; and his independently published *Invincible One, Poems* (EKP Books, 2017). His new book, *The White Mountain* (Hobblebush Books), is set for release in spring 2018. He lives in Manchester with his family.