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## Postcard Poetry from 1924: Hints of a Story in Limited Space

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# Postcard Poetry from 1924

*Hints of a story in limited space*

**Andrew Riely**



730—Lake of the Clouds Hut, A. M. C.

MY FRIEND ARI HARTMAN RUNS A VINTAGE POSTCARD BUSINESS. He knows my affinity for the White Mountains, so he sets aside items he thinks will catch my interest. Last year, he gave me an old black-and-white card showing Lakes of the Clouds Hut. It is dated 1924, making the hut not quite ten years old. The hut stands on its current site, although the building is only an embryo of its modern form. Three boys or young men stand in front of it, facing the camera, their faces indistinct. Curiously, someone has drawn an “X” over the hut’s entrance.

On the back, the owner jotted a few notes about his stay at Lakes. He never mailed the card to anyone. (I assume from the date and some details that the writer was male, although it is possible I’m mistaken.) The author turned the postcard perpendicularly and wrote in a neat cursive hand; the prose looks like a free-form poem. I have reproduced the spelling and punctuation exactly.

*Arrived at 2:40  
on Thursday  
Oct. 16 1924  
with 2 cans beans  
1 can salmon  
½ loaf bread  
Stayed until  
Saturday Oct.  
18.  
Three Frenchman  
and Guide  
arrive Friday for  
over night.  
One man sick  
“Groans.”  
So from there to Gorham  
Get ride in Packard*

Superficially prosaic, this list captures some of the most elemental aspects of hut life, especially food and the communal bunkroom. No one likes being sick on the mountain. French Canadians continue to interject a measure of

*The front of the old postcard shows a then-decade-old Lakes of the Clouds Hut.* COURTESY  
OF ANDREW RIELY

unpredictability and conviviality into the guest list. So much here is instantly recognizable to anyone who has stayed in a hut. Two items strike me as unusual: the can of salmon and the Packard. In recent years, fish has not been a common meal in the huts and I've never served or eaten fish in a hut. I just might one of these days, now that Patagonia has begun hawking salmon to high-end outdoorsmen and women. Some hikers still go into Gorham, but not for a train to and from the mountains. Of course, we still spend plenty of time getting to and from the trailheads in our cars.

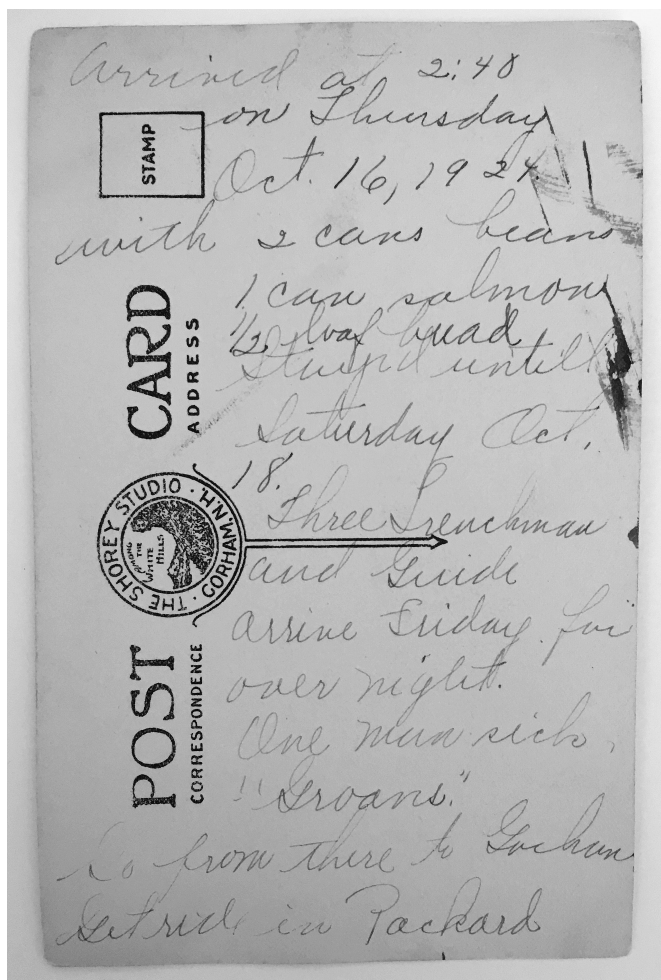
Despite the familiarity of the scene, the note leaves us with many questions. Did this hiker attempt the summit of Mount Washington on October 17? Was he alone? Why was he there so late in the season? Lakes of the Clouds Hut now closes nearly a month earlier than when he stayed there. (Until the 1960s, all AMC huts stayed open to the public after their full-service season ended, but today, only Carter Notch, Zealand Falls, and Lonesome Lake huts remain open all year.) Without caretakers, huts offered shelter and a wood- or coal-burning stove for cooking. Canned food left over from the summer might have supplemented supplies carried up the mountain by visitors.

My guess is that the hiker was traveling on his own. In my own explorations, I find that, although companionship makes a trip more fun, it neuters the impulse to record notes about the journey. Additionally, even if the hiker brought a few snacks that escaped mention and helped himself to some cans from the hut, his limited food supply suggests he wasn't responsible for feeding anyone else.

The ride to Gorham, which the hiker identifies by the model of car rather than the driver, seems significant. Did he forget to plan how to get to the train station in advance but get lucky by finding a car going from Pinkham Notch to Gorham?

I suspect he did not reach the top of Washington. Why not make note of it if he had? These days, many of us eschew the hurly-burly of the summit, but it was less heavily developed in the 1920s, and popular reservations about human impact were more limited, though growing. Perhaps the weather was cloudy—a real storm would have merited comment—or the hiker was tired or cold after his late-season ascent.

Conversely, the hiker may have been an old hand in the Presidential Range, so he wouldn't necessarily have noted reaching the summit. In that case, his prose becomes workmanlike, focusing on logistical details and unusual occurrences rather than the particulars of his sensory and emotional experience. He may not have arranged his ride to Gorham in advance because he was perfectly confident of his ability to find a ride with a stranger.



*The hiker's cryptic diary takes up the back of the postcard.* COURTESY OF ANDREW RIELY

We won't find definitive answers to these questions, obviously, but I like to be reminded of the constancy of mountain tourism (at least for the last century and a half). The Presidential Range is a deeply social place, a reality that is not without problems, but the relatively consistent nature of the mountains' use is reassuring amid a broader society that now seems very fragile.

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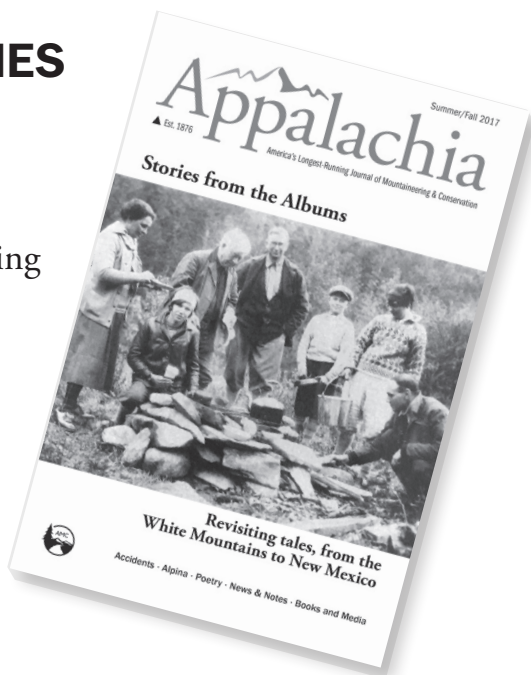
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