

2015

Where the Trail Ends: A Story of Losing a Friend and Finding a Mountain

Wendy Ungar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ungar, Wendy (2015) "Where the Trail Ends: A Story of Losing a Friend and Finding a Mountain,"
Appalachia: Vol. 66: No. 2, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol66/iss2/9>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Where the Trail Ends

A story of losing a friend and finding a mountain

Wendy Ungar



I RETURNED TO THE SUMMIT OF LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN IN THE SUMMER of 2008. Its massive stone face loomed over the forest and lake below just as it had when Jane and I stood upon it more than a decade before. I sat down and once again pressed my fingers against the rough surface of the warm rock. I didn't look out to the lake below. Instead, I looked in and recalled how difficult it had been to find our way to the top—the repeated failed attempts, the obstacles that were thrown in our path.

How can a trail become so disconnected from a mountain? How can our friendship stay connected to my life? Lookout gave me no answers that day. Jane was dead but the mountain was still here and so was I. I sat upon the summit remembering.

THE JOURNEY STARTED WHEN I LOOKED UP FROM MY BOWL OF CEREAL one morning in 1994 with the distinct feeling that someone was watching me through the picture window.

You again.

It was that face—the face of Lookout Mountain, its peak kissing the sky without shame. I stared back. Unlike its famous cousins, the High Peaks of New York's Adirondack Range, Lookout does not want to be found, let alone climbed, despite its inviting name. And here it was staring at me, just as it always had, through the kitchen window of our family summer home in Loon Lake. I felt it had something to tell me.

I decided the time had come to climb Lookout. I had to prepare properly for a journey that would take me up a mountain too obscure to be mentioned in any of the Adirondack trail guides. So I called up Jane, my faithful friend and hiking companion. Jane and I had met a few years earlier on an Adirondack Mountain Club High Peaks traverse. We quickly discovered our compatibility in the pace we chose to maneuver the rocks and roots along the forest trail as well as the uneven trail of our personal and professional lives as single 30-something academics.

"Jane, I have the perfect hike for us this summer. We can practice our map and compass skills."

"Love it," Jane replied. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to conquer Lookout Mountain."

Jane Neale happily stomps through mud on the Indian Pass Trail in New York's Adirondacks. WENDY UNGAR

Conquer—what an audacious word. As if anyone could hope to understand a mountain, to grasp the divine intention that placed the mountains and us here together, let alone conquer it. There are those who try to conquer mountains, cross a name off a list, and eventually earn a badge. And then there are those who prefer to have the mountain conquer them—to have its beauty and enormity, its mystery and its secrets invade and envelop. Jane was one of those.

HIKING WITH JANE MEANT HIKING WITH MOLLIE. ONE-QUARTER BLACK lab, one-quarter border collie, and two-quarters crazy, Mollie was just as avid as Jane and me. Although we loved to discover new trails, Jane and I were not peakbaggers. It was normal for Jane to stop on the trail to feel the texture of an unusual mushroom, poke her nose at a flower growing in the crack of a rotting log, or catch and release a tiny tree toad that happened to hop by. It was Jane who taught me how to pack the essentials for a day hike. Besides water, food, first aid kit, knife, topographical map, and compass, a pack was not complete without a copy of the bible. And it had to be Peterson's version. By the frayed look of Jane's copy of *A Field Guide to Wildflowers: Northeastern and North-Central North America* by Roger Tory Peterson, she had already identified every flower and still she hauled it along with Peterson's guide to birds and, sometimes, to mushrooms. Nature guides were her testaments and the woods her temple. And Jane treated this temple with reverence—she was its steward and guardian. If a trail was wet, I might tramp through the ferns and hobblebush that grew along the edges, but not Jane. Not wanting to cause erosion, Jane would happily stomp through the mud ponds that formed in the middle of the trail, even if it meant losing her boot. She respected the forest and its sacred earth. I believe she would have chosen it for eternity.

So late one August morning we set off to find Lookout. Most people who hike in these parts know that seeing a mountain and finding it are two different things. Finding just the right access point is key. Even for mountains with trails, you might spend hours looking for that blaze of faded blue painted on a pine tree past the meadow over a hill three miles from the creek that crosses the dirt track off a county side road. And with that elusive sign, you begin your ascent to another place.

Our region of the Adirondacks was and still is an area of active logging. It's not unusual to see trucks heavy with timber careening around the corners of back roads and know that a little bit more of the forest has been taken. The woods that are left are laced with tracks and trails that loop and stretch,

ending suddenly somewhere and usually nowhere. I love to walk in these woods and get to know the trails, to know where each curve rises and falls, disappearing suddenly and starting up again a hundred yards away. I love to know the woods and for the woods to know me—to accept me and grant me access.

LOOKING AT THE TOPO MAP, LOOKOUT ROSE FROM THE CONTOUR lines in shades of brown and green like a worn and lumpy quilt. Walking paths, jeep trails, rail beds, and logging roads were stitched into the mountain with the same authority as true north. Wilderness areas are not supposed to change. And topo maps, rarely updated, are meant to be steadfast. But who knew what was left of the human-made tracks. A trail could become disconnected from a mountain and just end, seemingly for no reason. But we needed a place to start. The map showed a dirt road off County Route 99 that ended with three houses. An old jeep trail extending from a corner in the dirt road would take us close to the base of the mountain. From there, following a compass bearing of 63 degrees north-northwest should lead us to the summit.

So off we went, our limbs covered in lightweight sleeves and pants. Jane was 5-foot-2 at most, but her presence was larger. It may have been from the way her citronella ablutions overwhelmed the air around her. Jane refused to use chemical mosquito repellants. Looking back now I wonder about her religious avoidance of chemicals—did it matter?

On the road, Mollie bounded forward and back, herding us along. We walked to the end of the dirt road and snooped around looking for the old jeep trail. It was unmistakable on the map, but there was no sign of it now. Instead, clumps of green and yellow grasses swayed in the breeze. We followed a parting in the grasses to a patch of raspberry brambles. It became clear that we were tracking a herd path. It seemed to be going toward the mountain base so we continued. The patch of brambles gradually spread into a wide field, the thorns growing sharper and the bushes higher as we advanced. The forest that once stood here had been stolen many years before. So nature sowed brambles of the meanest sort, a vengeful warning to stay away. The shrubs were now chin high and we could not see our boots. We had been hiking for two hours and had gone barely a mile.

“What do you think, Jane?” I asked, my frustration growing. “Should we keep going?”

“I don’t know. I have a long drive home to Albany this evening. Maybe we’d better turn back.”

Strangely, the reverse herd path didn't seem as straight as the original route. And then I spotted something in a tree about 30 feet ahead. Built into a tree, 12 feet above the ground, was a wooden platform. It had four plywood walls with small slats in two of the walls. A hunter's blind. I imagined the brambles being visited by a doe happily chewing the buds unaware that any moment her life could be ended by some inexplicable force aiming at her from above. And now we were in the brambles. Was someone watching us?

It was clear that we were not retracing our original steps. Somehow we ended up on a parallel herd path.

"Wendy, hold up a minute, let me pull out my map and compass."

"Sure," I replied, trying to mask my fear of being lost on this hidden mountain.

Jane pointed at the map. "Look. If we follow a straight compass bearing from where we thought we were to where we think we should be going, we should find our way back to the dirt road."

What Jane said made sense, although I couldn't explain why. I trusted her and she led us back to the road. Our first attempt at climbing Lookout had failed. We walked back to the house, a bit dejected but already planning our next attempt.

THE NEXT SUMMER WE SAT ON MY PORCH PLANNING ATTEMPT NUMBER TWO.

"I think where we started from last time was too northerly," I said, pointing at the map. "We might find this old jeep trail if we begin from a different corner of the dirt road."

Jane looked at Mollie and stroked her furry head. "What do you think Mollie-girl? Should we try this route?"

By her excited leaps, I guess Mollie could tell we were about to go for a romp in the woods. And so we started off again. Northeast of the dirt road we crossed a creek and moved into the woods, this time following only compass bearings. The forest here was immature, a thick mix of brambles and young hardwoods and softwoods. After an hour or so, we began to ascend. As we climbed higher, the woods thinned, but so did our daylight. An hour and a half later, we reached the top of a shoulder in the mountain. Looking south, we could see the summit taunting us. The true peak was a couple of miles and at least an hour of bushwhacking away. But we didn't have enough daylight to complete the hike. We would have to return home.

Twice thwarted, I felt more determined than ever to reach the peak and learn its secrets. I wonder now how Jane felt about trying again. We had

always hiked a variety of mountains every summer and I was compelling her to share my Lookout mission. I felt the pressure of time. Time makes almost no difference to a mountain, yet completely shapes a person's life. Did Jane care about scaling this mountain as much as I did? Was one trail as vital to her as any other? She never said.

ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1995, JANE, MOLLIE, AND I MET AGAIN AND STRATEGIZED. The days were shorter, so we had to choose correctly. The topo map showed a double-track that looped toward the base of the mountain about a half-mile south from where we had started the last time. We found the beginning of the double-track, and to our surprise, it appeared to be used regularly. We continued an easy walk along it, with nothing more than high grass and goldenrods tickling our knees. As we progressed, it became clear why this trail was so worn. It was a dumping ground for old appliances, car parts, and patio furniture. The farther we progressed, the older the junk was. We vowed one day to return with a wheelbarrow to reclaim an old Adirondack love seat that lay with its memories among the refuse. We never did.

After an hour or so of hiking, the path became confusing. Orange tape tied to branches formed a straight line through the trees. Crisscrossing this line like a large X was another swath cut with blue survey tape. Loggers, I thought. It was impossible to distinguish the jeep trail from the survey cuts.

Jane checked the map. "It looks like the old trail may turn north here. Have a good look around and memorize some landmarks for the trip back."

I counted the dead limbs on a nearby paper birch. Mollie circled around, sniffing. Then I looked in the direction of the summit and silently asked The Mountain for permission to ascend. We continued along the trail until we got close to the base. From there, we determined the compass bearing that should take us to the summit. At the point where we left the trail to bush-whack through the forest, I tied a sweatshirt around a tree. The way was thick at first, and we had to pull apart old fir limbs to move forward. But as we ascended the forest thinned as it granted us grace. We continued for about an hour, climbing higher than the loggers and their chainsaws. The forest smelled of humus, the ground felt soft and sacred underfoot. Eventually the grade became so steep it was necessary to grab on to saplings to pull ahead and keep from sliding back. We climbed at what felt like a 60-degree angle, using our hands and legs, our heads inches from the ground. Being taller than Jane I was able to climb farther and got ahead of her and Mollie. They were no longer in sight. I was alone on The Mountain. I stopped to wait for them

and looked up toward the sky. An enormous open rock face loomed above me. The cool forest had given way to the warmth of a stone atrium at least twenty yards wide. My heart pounded as I realized that this was the rocky crag that had teased and beckoned me over the years from miles away. I felt like a young child who had just discovered something new about the world. But the something new I had discovered was ancient. My legs began to fly forward, with Jane and Mollie tracing my route.

“We’re here! We’ve made it!” I shouted, my voice cracking in excitement.

The rock face was steeper than I had imagined, too steep to scramble up. Our only choice was to skirt the ridge and use the bordering trees as levers. We hoisted ourselves onto the top of the rock face. It was warm and peaceful. Jane, Mollie, and I stood upon the summit of Lookout Mountain. Below us, we could see Loon Lake and the cottages dotting its shoreline.

So this is what God sees.

We sat down and ate our food. I pressed the rough surface of the warm rock into my fingers. I recognized the steep red roof of our summer house far below. For some reason, it surprised me that I could not see through the kitchen window.

AFTER SOME TIME, JANE, MOLLIE, AND I BEGAN OUR DESCENT. WE followed our reverse compass bearings carefully, testing our skills against Mollie’s nose. We made it to the old trail only 20 feet from where we had entered the forest, marked by my sweatshirt (Mollie was right on the mark). Excited, we moved quickly along the old trail, chatting and laughing. And suddenly the trail ended. More precisely, it went off in four different directions.

“We’re back at the area of surveying. Look at all these paths going off into the woods! Do you remember which way we came from?” I asked, hoping Jane had kept better track of our route than I had.

“No, I don’t. Let me follow this blue-taped path for a bit. It seems like it should be heading back in the right direction.”

“Okay, but don’t go too far.”

I was alone again. The Mountain wasn’t through with us yet.

Jane returned after about ten minutes. “This trail’s no good. It only takes me deeper into the woods.”

As Jane and I talked about what to do, we noticed Mollie move through some trees.

“Mollie, come back, girl,” Jane called, afraid of losing her.



Jane on the summit of Lookout Mountain. WENDY UNGAR

Mollie returned, but as Jane and I talked, she went back to the same trees. We called her back again and once again let her go. This time we followed. Mollie led us straight out of the forest and back onto the old double-track trail.

I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN THAT TRIP UP LOOKOUT, THE CHALLENGES of finding our way, the encounters with unseen loggers and hunters and the humility that was required before we were granted access to the peak. The journey was one that I could have shared only with Jane.

Thirteen years later, in the summer of 2008, I decided to hike up Lookout again. It was the year after Jane's death. Jane was 46, in the summer of her life, when she was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Jane never smoked—you couldn't find a pair of lungs that had breathed more clean Adirondack air than Jane's. She died three months later. I needed answers. And I needed to get those answers in a place where I would feel closer to where she was.

I had heard that a trail had been marked all the way to the top. The route was different from the one that Jane, Mollie, and I had taken. All those years ago, we bushwhacked to the summit. And although we tried to follow a trail that seemed to be stitched as permanently as the mountain drawn on the

map, the steps we took were singular and never lasting. The ice storm of 1998 had made that route impenetrable, reclaiming it forever. And now here was this easy trail to the top. It had been blazed by the local hunting club that had leased the land from the timber company. The Mountain found a way to harness those forces that had stolen life from it and created such daunting obstacles for Jane and me. And now those same forces allowed me to get back to the mountaintop and find a route back to her.

COPING WITH A SUDDEN AND INEXPLICABLE DEATH IS A TRAILLESS mountain peak. There is no path, no accurate topographical map to guide you. The only compass point is your heart. In the weeks after her death, Jane's family came to visit me. We stood together on my dock on Loon Lake within sight of Lookout Mountain and poured out some of Jane's ashes. The soft gray specks scattered into the sparkling waters and caught on the breeze. Here Jane would rest, her physical body joining the plankton and the lake trout that live in the waters and the jewelweed that grows along the shore. Her spirit is now a permanent part of this place. And my friendship with her will stay as eternal as The Mountain.

WENDY UNGAR is fond of hiking mountains that are tall, short, green, white, blue, or any other color. She has a home in Loon Lake, New York. The Adirondack Mountain Club has established an endowed fund in Jane's memory to support participation in ADK's annual Teen Trails Program. To find out more about the Jane Neale Fund or the annual Jane Neale Memorial Hike, please contact wendy.ungar@utoronto.ca.

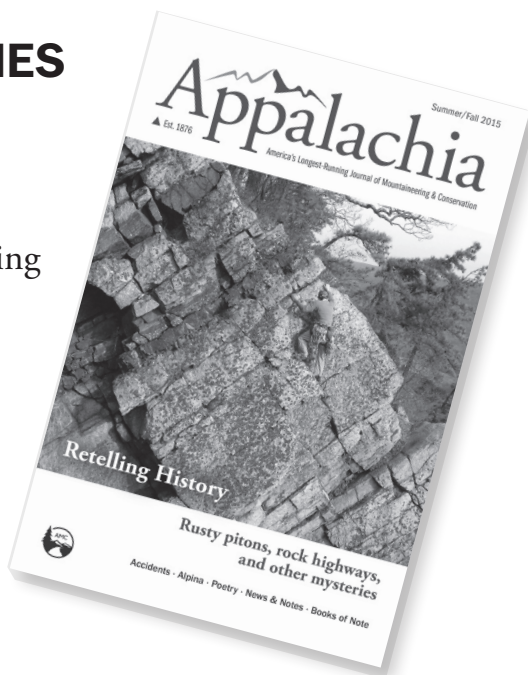
Editor's note: Portions of this story originally appeared in "Remembering Jane," Adirondac, March–April 2013.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date info, visit outdoors.org.