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Timber Kings

Girls walk through history on the Franconia Ridge

Caroline Santinelli

In memory of Kendra Bowers, friend, sister, Lodge girl



I STOOD ON THE TREELESS RIDGE BETWEEN LITTLE HAYSTACK AND Mount Lafayette, looking down into Franconia Notch. The land dipped and rose in every direction around Interstate 93. Where I stood above treeline, in the alpine zone, only plants that can withstand the unforgiving winds, precipitation, and freezing temperatures of the winter can grow. Yet, the thick canopy below us blanketed the mountainsides. A spectrum of green fanned up the slopes. Yellow birches, beeches, and sugar maples swept up from the valley, slowly fading with elevation until only the shimmering needles of spruce and fir remained.

I thought about those lean trunks below us. The largest evergreens along the trail were only wide enough to suggest about one hundred years of age; only a trained eye could detect the handful of outliers that dotted the forest. Every step I took across the ridge I felt a pebble chewing away at the back-most part of my heel. I ignored the constant irritation every time my right foot came down on the dusty path. The girls were almost at the top of the mountain. I could take my boot off there, if we ever made it. My campers stopped every twenty feet, posing for pictures against the backdrop of valleys and peaks that flank the ridge from Little Haystack to Lincoln to Lafayette. Though I desperately wanted to usher them faster along the trail, I smiled and paused, watching them join the generations of us Singing Eagle Lodge girls who, through the decades, stomped our boots across that ridge in the summer.

The Falling Waters Trail and the Franconia Ridge Trail are part of an 8.9-mile loop, over the three peaks. The Old Bridle Path sends you back into the valley on the opposite side of Mount Lafayette. These trails were written into the landscape by thousands of travelers. Every footprint carves a new story into the dusty paths and jagged peaks. Every surface touched by history. Yet, the histories that are never published are our own memories—the stories, trials, and traditions that tie people to the land; the reasons we care to conserve it. These places are the storytellers and the teachers, transcending language through weathered trails and slender tree trunks. They are a memory as big as a clear-cut and as small as footprint, held eternally in the mountains to remind us of the beauty in life that we fight to sustain and their forming force on our lives.

Extending 40 miles from north to south and nearly the same length east to west, the silhouette of the White Mountains highlights the New Hampshire

Singing Eagle Lodge campers on the Franconia Ridge. CAROLINE SANTINELLI

sky. Almost no land east of the Mississippi River rises higher than these peaks, which are visible from 80 miles away on the south and southeast sides. Thick woods of spruce and fir trees coat the mountainsides and valleys. These trees stand tall and staunch along the stream banks, but cower in comparison to the bare, rocky summits, worn raw through winter, storm, and time.

On the northwestern boundary of the range, where the Pemigewasset River flows south from Profile Lake, are the Franconia Mountains. From parts of the mountains, I can watch the 65 miles of river run parallel to Interstate 93, descending through the narrow valley of the range. The river, the valley, and the mountains together compose Franconia Notch State Park, which straddles eight miles of the interstate beginning in the town of Franconia and continuing south into Lincoln, New Hampshire. Mount Lafayette and Cannon Mountain Ski Resort begin the northernmost part of the park. At 5,200 feet, Lafayette is the tallest mountain in the Franconia Range and begins the eastern side of the Notch. Across the valley, Cannon Mountain was home to the late “Old Man of the Mountain,” whose rocky profile remains a proud part of the region’s history.

The first time I saw the Old Man’s ragged face I was 9 years old. It was also the last. Less than a year later, in May 2003, the old stony profile finally crumbled from its perch on the mountain. I stood in the parking lot with the rest of my fourth-grade class staring up at the craggy man coming out of the mountainside. He was smaller than I imagined. The large cables and wires holding his nose and chin in the sky, fighting the earth, made the whole thing seem less magical.

Before the park and the interstate, the Franconia region was home to the Penecook—a western branch of the Abenaki people consisting of seventeen tribes. When the Europeans arrived, roughly 12,000 Abenaki populated the White Mountain region. They spoke a dialect of the Algonkin language. They had no written letters or words, but descendants of the Penecook people are renowned storytellers. They believed in the Great Spirit, Ktsi Nwaskw, the creator of all things.

As a young girl, enthralled by my own naïve re-creation of the Native Americans’ natural world, I played Indian in the woods behind my house with my brother and sister. Being oldest of us three, I had the self-declared honor of wearing my grandfather’s old dress-up Indian shirt and carried his paint-chipped, wooden toy ax. The tasseled sleeves and chipped red paint flew through the trees in a whirlwind of make-believe history as we danced for rain, searched for arrowheads, or trampled through the woods during

the hunt, the earth cracking under our recklessly noisy feet. It was by no means a historically accurate interpretation of Abenaki tradition or lifestyle, but our childhood games kept us outside, engaged with the natural world and our imaginations.

Around the same age, I went with my class at school to hear a storyteller. His name was Joseph Bruchac, a descendent of the Abenaki peoples. That was first time I heard the story of Ktsi Nwaskw. Years later, I stumbled across a collection of Bruchac stories, where I read, once again, the old Abenaki creation myth.

When Ktsi Nwaskw decided to create human beings, he began with the stones. "Life was breathed into these stone beings and they stood and began to walk around," wrote Bruchac. "But, although they were able to breathe and walk, to hunt and eat, there were things that those first people could not do." These human beings' stiff limbs could not reach down to touch the earth and their stony hearts could not feel. They wasted their food, killed too much, and crushed everything in their path with their dense feet.

The Great Spirit turned these people back into stone. They did not treat the earth with love or respect. "That is why there are so many stones here in the Northeast," Bruchac explained. "Sometimes when you turn over a stone you may see that it has a face on it, and you are supposed to remember what happened to those people who treated everything else in creation with contempt." The new people of the earth needed to add to the beauty of the land. They needed to understand the delicacy of their home. Ktsi Nwaskw chose the ash trees. "Those new people were rooted to the earth and were in balance with the life around them," Bruchac said. "They were our ancestors, the first Abenaki. We are the children of the trees."

I thought about sharing what I could remember of the story with my campers on the ridge, but I knew I could not do it justice. That story belonged to the mountains and the Abenaki. A different history led us women to the ridge that day; her name was Dr. Ann Tompkins Gibson, known to her close friends as Doc Ann.

Doc Ann set out to establish an appreciation for nature in younger generations of women and to teach them how to care for and conserve it.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1879, Ann Tompkins was no ordinary girl. As the daughter of a prominent Episcopal minister on the Main Line in Philadelphia, she led a very spiritual life. When she was a child, she accompanied her father west, where he worked as a missionary to American Indians. Away from hectic city life, she fostered a deep spiritual connection

and appreciation of the natural world. Later, after her marriage, Doc Ann went to medical school and became a surgeon. She had one son, and after her husband died, Doc Ann began working at Camp Iroquois on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire.

It was a summer camp for 70 girls, ages 11 through 18. In 1920, she bought land on Squam Lake's Bean Cove. That summer, she moved everything about Camp Iroquois—songs, teams, colors, and people—to Squam, except the name. She renamed her new camp Singing Eagle Lodge.

"Doc Ann believed in building character," said former camper Peggy Fowler. "One of her favorite sayings was, 'What you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you say.' She pushed us to be everything we could be. But, she did so tenderly; with a fantastic sense of humor . . . she was an expert at tough love, concerned with ecology (she was eternally picking up litter), respectful of the original Indian inhabitants of the land, and interested in their ways and lore."

One of the many ways she pushed the girls was through her love of the mountains. They climbed once a week each of the eight weeks of the summer. The girls made up a new song for each mountain, setting new words to tunes they knew. "Some became perennial favorites," recalled Peggy. "Some died a rapid, unlamented death."

One mountain trip remains a camp legend. In summer 1923, 49 girls from Singing Eagle Lodge were on the last peak of a three-day mountain trip. Shadows fell quickly and quietly on the ridge, as each of the 49 girls clung anxiously to the collar of the girl in front of her. In the distance, the windows of the Profile House—one of the mountains grand hotels—gleamed in the fading light. Whispers of the orchestra echoed through the valleys beneath their feet. Caught by nightfall, the hikers clung tighter to the fists of white cloth in their palms. Each girl wore a simple white middie blouse with a triangular middie tie, heavy brown serge bloomers, and woolen knee socks. The councillors led them nervously from the front of the pack, groping and tripping down the steep trail into the valley.

One by one, like a row of ants, the 49 marched down the trail in silence. Exhaustion marked their faces, one girl began quietly sobbing, but the others tried to refrain; crying would be contagious. So, they sang: camp songs, rounds, hymns, even Christmas carols. On and on the girls sang, each song more ridiculous than the last. Suddenly, a "ghost voice" broke out in the still night from the hotel.

"Stop that noise on the mountain!" it called. "You are disturbing the guests in the Profile House!" The orchestra had stopped playing for the night, and

the guests wanted peace and quiet as they enjoyed the wilderness from their lush, warm hotel rooms. But if they were not going to help the girls off the mountain, then the girls would not stop their singing. So late into the night, songs rang from high on the mountain down to the hotel in the valley, while shouts from the valley echoed back up to the 49 girls descending Mount Lafayette.

I remember sitting in the lodge at camp, listening to my councillors tell us about Doc Ann, the “Old Camp,” and the story of the Profile House. As a camper, I thought they told us from their own experience—of course that would make even the youngest of them nearly 95 years old. But the spell was not broken after I finally realized it was as much a legend to them as it was to us. We all sat, 80 campers and 30 councillors, crammed into the small one-room lodge, legs crossed, eyes glazed over, our minds completely absorbed by the storyteller. Knowing smiles crept across each girl’s face when they finally told that the Profile House burned to the ground later that night. Girls stole a glance at the photo in the top row on the wall of the lodge. The little woman in the white deerskin dress stood proudly watching us from her frame, her soft white hair pinned neatly to the nape of her neck.



The New
 PROFILE
 HOUSE
and
 Cottages

WHITE MOUNTAINS
 NEW HAMPSHIRE



A brochure for the comfortable Profile House in Franconia Notch after its 1905 renovation. Profile House’s demise in a 1923 fire after guests refused to help 49 campers caught in the dark became part of the Singing Eagle Lodge lore.

DICK HAMILTON COLLECTION

Though the story's convenient ending perhaps exaggerates the timing, the grand Profile House did burn on August 2 that year. The reported cause of the fire was not a young, spiteful camp counselor, but still no one is certain how it started. Perhaps we imagined that hint of mischief on Doc Ann's kind, old face, but we let our imaginations run wild thinking about the woman who brought us all together.

She was easy to idolize. Some of us often wonder if we praise her too much; she was just one woman after all, just as human as the rest of us. But I think it's her example that we strive toward, creating versions of our better selves through the lessons and stories she passed down. Her memory keeps us rooted to the places we love. We still sing about Doc Ann pioneering Mount Lafayette, and it took me years to realize she was the first Lodge girl to make the climb, but not the first person ever to climb Lafayette.

Darby Field, an Irishman from Boston, became the first white man to visit the White Mountains, when he climbed to the top of Mount Washington in 1642. Accompanied by two American Indians, he traveled for eighteen days, climbing for 40 miles through the thick forests in the valleys.

His motives for making the climb are a mystery, but Field triggered a surge of climbers when he returned with shining stones that he mistook for diamonds. That century, the range appeared on maps as the "White Mountains"; however, exploration declined as the Northeast became the battleground of the French and Indian War.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, more tourists began to trickle into the area—scientists on sponsored expeditions, painters trying to capture images of the wilderness, writers and poets searching for inspiration.

Authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote about "the silent crags" of the Old Man of the Mountain. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about "The Great Stone Face." Daniel Webster once said in a speech, "Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades. Shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers, a monster watch; even a dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but up in the Franconia Mountains God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that in New England He makes men."

By the 1850s, thousands of tourists poured into the region simply for pleasure. The serene mountains of New Hampshire became a five-star playground for wealthy urban Americans. With the era of the grand hotel well underway, hotels for those who wanted the experience of the wilderness without camping outdoors began popping up within the Whites. Across from Franconia Ridge, the Profile House was one of the finest summer hotels in the

United States. Situated in the north end of Franconia Notch—what is now the parking lot of Cannon Ski Resort—it was named after the great stone profile of the Old Man of the Mountain, who hovered several hundred feet above the hotel's verandas.

Built in 1853 by Richard Taft, the Profile House began as a “simple” three-and-a-half story building, but grew into a small empire for wealthy urbanites and timber kings. The hotel owned 6,000 acres of the surrounding mountains. After the addition of twenty cottages in 1868—where regular summer guests could spend their whole summer in private housing—the hotel could accommodate more than 500 guests.

Yet tourists were among just a few of the people drawn to Whites. Where some saw a lush forest, budding timber entrepreneurs saw mountains of riches. These entrepreneurial monarchs realized their horses and oxen could not handle the strenuous terrain of the rocky mountainsides, and the rivers were too narrow to float the harvested timber out of the valleys. So in 1874, the Gale River Lumber Company built the first logging railroad from the south bank of the Ammonoosuc River. The rails were crude transportation, lacking in proper construction and foundation. During the reign of timber kings, nineteen logging railroads were built in the Whites. At the peak of their operation, ten logging rails carried the gold of the wilderness to the paper mills.

As tourism rose in the White Mountains, so did the rate of logging operations. People flocked from nearby cities to admire the vast forests nearly as fast as they were being chopped down. Until 1870, people used rags to produce most paper, but as chemists soon discovered, it was cheaper to make paper from wood fibers. The demand for wood-based paper increased so rapidly that by 1900 the pulp mills in the White Mountains were devouring young spruce at the rate of 100 million feet a year. Imagine—it would take more than 300,000 football fields to cover that length.

In Franconia, people used railroads for more than timber transport. In 1879, Taft built the Profile and Franconia Notch Railroad in response to the need for faster transportation of vacationers in and out of the Profile House grounds. The rail further increased the influx of tourists pouring into the hotel, taking as many as ten trips per day between the hotel and the rail's end at the Bethlehem Junction in Bethlehem, New Hampshire. Popularity continued to rise, so in 1906, the Profile House underwent a massive renovation.

It was the kingdom of the mountains. A large farm, with a herd of dairy cows, a greenhouse, and a power plant made the hotel entirely self-sufficient.

The old dining hall was converted into a ballroom. A golf course, three tennis courts, and a couple badminton courts extended across the grounds; post and telegraph offices, a bowling alley, a barbershop, a billiard hall, a music room, a souvenir shop, and one of the first passenger elevators all served the summer vacationers.

Then came that summer of 1923, when the 49 Lodge girls found themselves in the dark on Franconia Ridge. On August 2, flames danced swiftly across the grounds, swallowing cottages in thick, dark smoke. Fire ravaged the grassy verandas. The hotel in the mountains was an inferno. It took four hours. Everything in the summer utopia crumbled to the ground.

With it came the fall of the timber kings in Franconia Notch. The disaster forced the owners of the property to put up the 11,000 acres for sale to logging operators. To which the public responded with a national campaign to raise money to purchase the land. Conservationists raised \$200,000, and the state of New Hampshire appropriated a matching amount of funds. Franconia Notch State Park will forever remain a protected forest.

By the time the park formed, Doc Ann had begun her eighth year at Singing Eagle Lodge. The Lodge girls found an escape from their hectic, urban lives in the tranquility of Squam Lake and their hikes through the mountains.

When the world feels as though it is closing in, people turn to the mountains, the lakes, or even the woods in their backyard. We go back to the stories and lessons that lay fossilized in the landscapes of our past.

I think about this every time I lead a new year of campers up the slick and rocky Falling Waters trail. I think about the Lodge girls who hiked here before them. I think about the people we meet along the way, who hold their own stories and traditions in the mountains.

Every year, as we reach the summit of Lafayette, the late-afternoon sun hangs above the jagged purple lines of peaks in the distance. I listen to my campers laughing and singing as they start down the Old Bridle Path. A chill sweeps across the rocks. One last look, and I turn to descend.

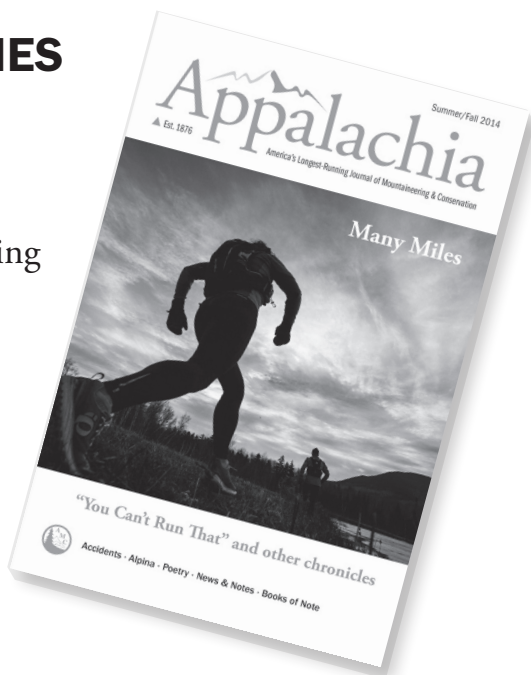
CAROLINE SANTINELLI has worked as a councillor at Singing Eagle Lodge and on the croo of the Appalachian Mountain Club's Greenleaf Hut, below Mount Lafayette. She is studying environmental nonfiction at Middlebury College. Kendra Bowers, to whom this story is dedicated, was a fellow councillor who died in a ski accident in winter 2014.

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