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Bethann Weick

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Through the Door

A piece of the old Madison hut lives on in a cabin

Bethann Weick



AT THE END OF THE DAY, I WALK THROUGH THE WOODS. IT IS A simple trail, leading through a mix of birch, beech, maple, oak, and cherry. Some softwoods, too. In the summer, it is shaded, but the trail is dry. In the fall, a kaleidoscope of colors hides the well-trod path; the smell of moist duff is prominent. In the winter, ice and snow wrap the few rocks and blanket the ground; little wind disturbs the evenness of the powder. Come spring, the wet spots are mucky, mushrooms abundant, and the dry spots few. This path is well known to me, and so it feels comfortable, reliable. It is a friend, in the way a favorite tree is also a comrade or a quiet dell feels akin to a companion. This walk brings me home.

The cabin is cozy, settled into a landscape that was once home to loggers and farmers, and Abenakis before them. The history extends behind me, told by old cellar holes and chipped granite, pottery shards, and the remaining wall of the old sawmill. Now, I am writing my own history, another link in this chain of people on the land.

The structure is simple—one room with a loft above—but it is home. It was built as summer turned to fall and concluded as fall turned to winter. It is beautiful with the effort put into it; personalized by the skills learned through the work itself.

There is one door, on the eastern wall. It bears the signs of much weathering. To enter, I grasp the handle that has been grasped by so many before. An Appalachian Mountain Club sticker sits in the bottom windowpane. If you look closely, a nail lingers in one corner. It is nondescript, eliciting a reaction from none but those who know. It's bent, perhaps from being reused, perhaps from carelessness in affixing it—I no longer recall the reason. Whichever it is, this nail once held taut a thread of fishing line. The nail held one end of the tensioning system in a more-fun-than-successful alarm system concocted by enthusiastic hut croo in the raiding tradition of the White Mountains' high huts. This door, you see, was once the entrance to Madison Spring Hut.

The cabin whose threshold it now guards, however, is situated much lower in elevation, in the foothills of the Whites, beside the South Branch of the Baker River. This has become my home. The door has followed me down to a life in the valley. We now are settled in the hills whose harshness is habitable, unlike the imperious, weather-strafed, and desolate col in which we both once resided.

Bethann Weick didn't need a door for her new cabin, but her heart ached for the one she'd pushed open so many times. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

Each time I walk the woodland path and let myself in the tiny house, I recall another trail and another home: packboard on my back, boxes piled above my head, legs straining to reach and balance over each rock step; an alpine wind pushing me on. The Valley Way, too, had its seasonal characteristics and defining steps. It, too, led to a cabin, cozy in that it kept out the elements, providing shelter, food, warmth, and friendships. It, too, was entered through the same heavy, AMC-stickered door.

As the rebuilding of Madison began, I lucked into ownership of the door as it was auctioned off. The reunion of the OH Association (once called the Old Hutmen's Association) that autumn of 2010 centered on the Madison effort. To assist in fundraising for the rebuild, the association auctioned off many of the Madison dining room benches, bunk ladders, and a few other items of nostalgia—including the hut's front door itself. My heart ached to keep with me a piece of this hut; the possibility threatened tears and an uncontrollable grin, simultaneously. Still, at the time, I didn't need a door. In fact, I distinctly remember not wanting a door. But I did want a home. And, as the threshold to so many memories and sentiments connected with the Whites, this door connoted a sense of belonging. It cued a wellspring of emotion and allegiance to a grand and powerful landscape. Even without four walls to support it, this door represented a home more than any house I yet had.

Of course, I reasoned, any item would go for far more money than I could offer, and besides, where would I go with it? At the time, I was working at an educational farm and living in a silo. Nevertheless, I was in disbelief when, for a mere \$25, I carried away the Madison hut's old front door. I returned the next morning to the farm, where we were building a greenhouse out of recycled doors and windows. The Madison door became our western entrance to the building. It was with remarkable generosity and understanding that, when I left the farm, this beloved entranceway was returned to me. And so I carried the door, my home without a house, along the woodland trail, to the clearing in which we were building our cabin.

Now that our home has a door, and the door has a house, I can reflect on the continuity and the passion represented by this Madison entry.

I've worked on hut croos through five full-service seasons, including hutmastering at Madison Spring Hut in summer 2006, plus another four seasons caretaking in the shoulder seasons and in backcountry shelters. Working across the ranges of the Whites, my tenure as a croo member

profoundly affected the perspective through which I've continued to view the world, and the manner in which I've chosen to live.

Since that summer at Madison, my first season as hutmaster, I have kept with me the Joe Dodge quote, "You lead with your actions, and keep your damn mouth closed. You don't lead men with your mouth. You lead them by showing them you can do a better job at anything there is." Although the mayor of Porky Gulch (his name for Pinkham Notch) had a particular flavor to his proclamations, I hearkened to the notion of leading well by doing well. The hut seasons were a period of maturation and definition, a place and time to grow into my personhood. The lessons learned in a croo room, and the lessons learned upon an alpine ridge, left an indelible mark. In the huts and their surrounding dramatic, weathered landscape, I absorbed lessons of vulnerability and humility. The huts taught the dichotomy, which is better experienced than rationalized, of being vastly important while small and fleeting. The huts were where I learned to view life—and my life—from the perspective of the geologic legacy on which I was perched. Human life is fleeting, beautiful, vast, unknowable.

The huts presented all this to me—over time, of course. I enjoyed many giddy, cocky evenings of costumes and midnight raids and an equal number of serene moments, perched alone on crags, caught between wind and rock and cloud. Wisdom was a process of osmosis, offered by sunsets enacted through the mercurial forces of weather across a regal landscape. The mountains demanded a disposition toward responsibility (at risk of death) and the confidence to rely on personal judgment (at risk of no alternative). Through this and more, the huts taught a love of the simple life and bestowed the strength and fortitude of character to live pleasantly with basic comforts satisfied.

The mountain peaks themselves, however, cannot be lived in for a lifetime. The peaks can teach of life by threatening its cessation, but one can't live there for a life span.

Such a perspective, absorbed with each entry and exit through the Madison door, led me to pursue a life in the woods. Here I could create a life that eliminated the distractions, glossy entertainments, and virtual realities of contemporary life; a life that held sacrosanct the stark majesty of the mountains. With my spirit lingering on the ridges of an alpine abode, my mind turned to the pursuit of essentials: stewardship; self-reliance; living lightly, smartly, strongly, courageously, purposefully.

And so I arrived at Coösaue.

An Abenaki Indian word translating to “Place of the Pines,” Coösaue is the name of our 28-acre homestead where I live with my partner Ryan. We have neither running water nor electricity; our home is built by hand, 16 feet by 18 feet. There is an apple tree outside the front door, a garden to the east, a river to the west, and woods all around. It is a simple and challenging—and pleasurable—life. Together, we are carving an existence out of the wooded hillsides of the Northern Forest.

As in the huts, I must walk to reach our home. Our shelter is simple, built from wood felled on the land. Walls break the wind and hold the warmth of the meal shared within. Unlike the huts, however, I can live here. Gardens are developed, soil is created, and a life is formed. The details of a home are writ across the nearby landscape. Buckets for water, a shed for tools, chairs for company, stakes to mark precious plants and young trees. Though the huts—the mountains—may be home to my spirit, this woodland homestead with its beauties and its challenges is home to my body and to my heart.

With each step through the Madison door, I am reminded how I am living one life through the legacy of another. Spanning two life experiences, two places to call home, two niches, two points in time and space. The mountain peaks and the wooded hills, brought side by side with each open and close of the door.

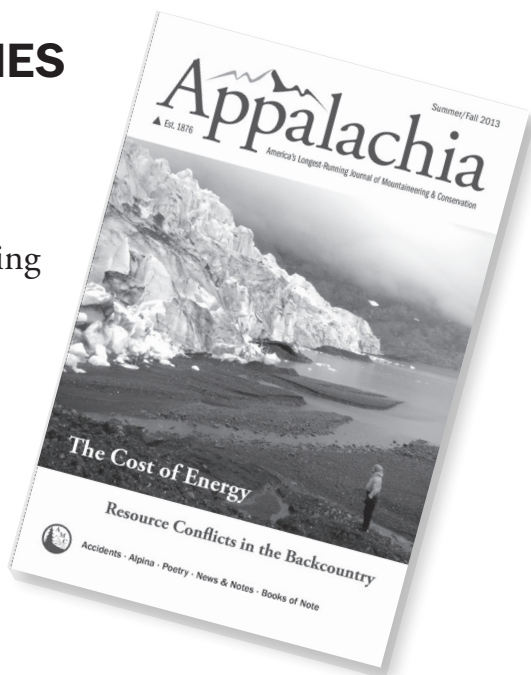
BETHANN WEICK lives in Dorchester, New Hampshire.

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