

2012

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Recommended Citation

Teschner, Douglass P. (2012) "Ding 'Em Down, Revisited: Two Generations in the Appalachian Mountain Club Huts," *Appalachia*: Vol. 63: No. 2, Article 11.

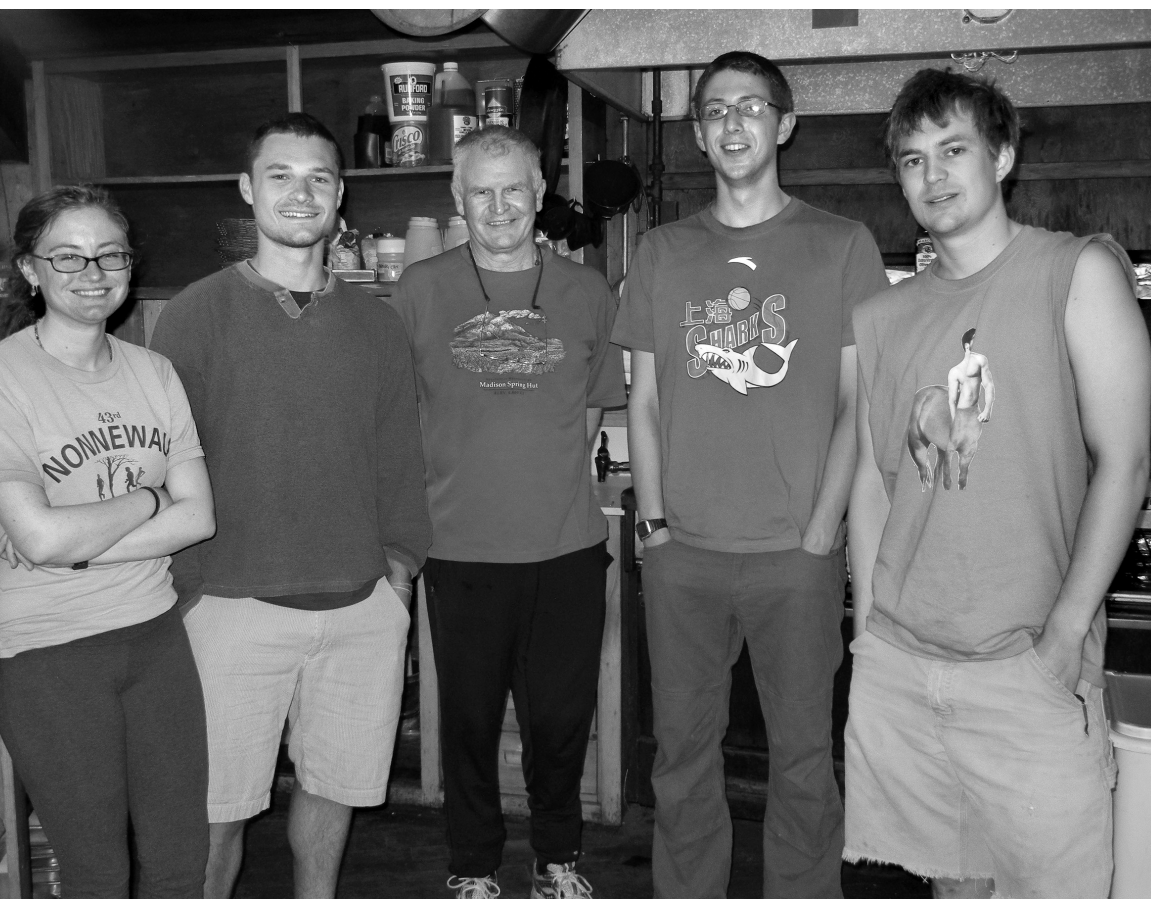
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Ding 'Em Down, Revisited

Two generations in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts

Douglass P. Teschner



Just what was it that was so special about the “huts” anyway? Aren’t they just another way man has forced himself upon the wilderness?

IN 1971, AS A LONELY PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER IN FAR OFF MOROCCO, I found solace penning that line. It was part of a lengthy manuscript about working in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts (Zealand Falls, 1968 and ’70, Mizpah Spring, ’69) that I titled, “When a Job Becomes a Way of Life.” *Appalachia* editor Lyle Richardson cut the length, retitled it as “Ding ’Em Down” after the bells that summoned guests to meals, and published it in June 1972 (XXXIV no. 1). He left in some of my philosophical musings:

All you can speak for is the profound spiritual existence that you experienced in those valleys and ridges. You can only speak for what those summers meant to you.

As a lifetime White Mountain hiker, I have stopped by the huts many times in the intervening years, although rarely for overnight stays. Once you have been part of the hut crew, or “croo,” it is hard to go back as a guest. I had, of course, taken my young sons, Ben and Luke, hiking, despite some youthful resistance. Parenting is a tricky business. I tried to find the right balance between exposing kids to what I love and allowing them to find their own way. I recall one mid-1990s ascent of the Old Bridle Path where my brother and I conspired to keep our complaining boys moving upward with a spirited game of “Twenty Questions.” A Greenleaf croo member passed descending, derisively commenting on the noise level. “If you only knew,” I remember muttering. “One day you will hopefully be a mother!”

My older son Ben (now 27) went to college at the Colorado School of Mines and evolved into a passionate geologist, mountain biker, and backcountry skier. .

One November day in 2006, when younger son Luke was a high school senior, I convinced him to join me for a hike across the windy and foggy Franconia Ridge. Above treeline, I remember thinking, “I’ll bet Luke is

Doug Teschner relived his days as a White Mountain philosopher when his son Luke started working in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts 40 years after Doug had. Here, Doug, center, and Luke, right, pose with the rest of the Lonesome Lake Hut “croo” (from left): Chloe Bourne, Harrison Muskat, and Wynn Tucker.

COURTESY OF DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

finding this pretty cool,” an illusion shattered atop Mount Lincoln when he disconnected from his iPod long enough to say, “This is boring, Dad.”

Two years later, when Luke, then a college sophomore, came out for Christmas to Burkina Faso (where I was serving as the Peace Corps country director), I casually asked about his summer plans.

“Well you know Dad, I don’t want to work as a lifeguard again this year. What I would really like is to get one of those jobs on the hut croo,” he said somewhat sheepishly. I could hardly contain my excitement as I suggested how to apply and prepare for the interview. Luke took it all in but pushed back a bit at my intrusiveness, saying he wanted to get the job on his own. Several weeks later, he emailed enthusiastically the news that he would be a rookie croo member at Galehead!

I immediately began planning my summer vacation in the United States to overlap the May former hut croo members’ spring reunion and June hut season opening. En route to the reunion, Luke and I stopped at the venerable Limmer boot shop in Intervale, where we rendezvoused with Tom Johnson and Chris “Hawkeye” Hawkins, longtime friends from the 1970 Zealand croo.

Soon after, Luke attended the preseason hut croo training and “gala” (we’d never had that) and came home with stories about the legendary Joe Dodge, who founded the huts. Bruce Sloat was huts manager when I worked on croo, but I recounted for Luke my seeing Joe Dodge at a hutmen’s reunion in Boston. It was as if God himself had entered the room.

Sadly, I did not see Luke in action at Galehead his rookie summer. He came down with a fever and spent the time I would have been at the hut recuperating at our house in New Hampshire. The day before I flew back to Africa, I hiked up to Galehead by myself and met his crewmates, who had already posted a “Welcome back, Luke” sign.

Despite the feverish beginning, 2009 was a great summer for Luke. *Backpacker* magazine writer Bill Donahue spent time at the hut and quoted Luke often in his article, “The Trail to Neverland,” which appeared in the August 2010 issue:

Luke Teschner is a lanky and well-mannered kid, soft-spoken and humble. He sports a blonde crewcut and a neat black earring in his left ear, and earlier he confided that he’s a bit freaked out by the whole culinary thing. “Before this summer,” he says, “I never cooked anything. I mean, like nothing. At school, I go to the dining hall. But the recipe book they have here? It’s awesome!

You follow the instructions—this much sugar, that much flour—and it works. It's cool!"

Later in the summer, Donahue wrote:

Teschner's hair is a little longer now, less bristly, and he has patches of duct tape stuck on his shoulders, covering an oozing yellow mélange of friction sores. Two days earlier, he had packed his first century, laboring up the Gale River Trail bearing 110 pounds. "When I first came here," he says, "I thought carrying 50 pounds up the trail time after time was going to crush me. I didn't see how I could do it. But I broke the trail down mentally, into sections—this river crossing, that rocky pitch. During the last quarter-mile, I felt like I was going to collapse, I could hardly put one foot in front of the other, I was so tired. But I never questioned that I was going to make it. I've gained confidence this summer."

Apparently Luke's work was appreciated, and Hut Manager Eric Pedersen offered him a job for 2010 at Madison, the final year before that hut's planned major reconstruction. Once again, I made plans for a visit, this time in August, hoping for a better outcome.

Through June and July, word of Luke's hut exploits filtered out to Ukraine (where I had moved over the winter), mostly via emails from my 85-year-old mother. She lives on the Maine coast, to which Luke often traveled for his three days off every two weeks. I wrote about days off in "Ding 'Em Down":

Yet no matter how good days off seemed, by the second day you were ready to get back to the hut. Somehow you just felt out of place in the valley.

Time for my much-anticipated visit finally came. On August 15, my wife Marte dropped me at the Madison pack house, where a note indicated that old croo friend Hawkeye had started up the trail. Two of the female croo arrived down from the hut, headed out for days off, and we chatted briefly about the summer.

I changed into hiking clothes, repacked my gear, and set off across Route 2 and under the power line to the Beechwood Way.

Less than a mile up, I met Luke descending, and we joyfully hugged, our first encounter since February when I had visited Ithaca College for his 21st birthday and ski team race. He was carrying some clothes down to our car,

and I suggested he go to lunch in Gorham with his waiting mother and meet me later back up at the hut. I thought of when I used to arrive back at the hut so many years ago:

A clean, healthy feeling passed through you as you inhaled the mountain air laced with the smell of balsam and birch, absorbed the little sights along the trail that had become so familiar yet somehow more familiar every trip, and listened to the rhythmical pounding of your Limmers on the solid earth.

Beechwood Way ends at the Valley Way where the real climbing began. The total elevation gain is 3,500 feet over 3.8 miles, making Madison the most challenging among the AMC huts.

Not that long ago, I could halve the AMC *White Mountain Guide* book time of 3 hours 40 minutes for this hike to Madison, but I figured that that now I'd take 3 hours, 2:30 at best. Ukraine is mostly flat, so I wasn't in the best hiking shape, a fact compounded by the steady deterioration of my arthritic knees—a condition some say goes back to carrying heavy loads to the huts. I set a steady, sustainable pace, savoring it all.

One of the biggest changes in the huts today is that helicopters have largely replaced the once crushing pack loads. (I once carried 145 pounds into the, albeit much easier, Zealand, and 110 pounds was my final summer average—pretty typical back then). The loads were heavier, and we packed every day; today's croos do it twice a week.

I eventually caught Hawkeye, and we walked and talked (“social climbing,” I call it) for about half a mile to the Valley Way tentsite. Long before there was camping there, this place was known to the hut croos as “Thousand Yards” for the steep final distance to the hut. Chris, in his usual social style, stopped to converse with some old neighbors descending. I pushed ahead, checking my watch.

Maybe you hurried up the last part so you wouldn't have to stop and get out your flashlight or maybe it was because you couldn't wait to get home.

Knowing the hut was close, I pushed harder and arrived in 2:28—exactly double Luke's best ascent time for the summer, but not too bad for me!

I was greeted warmly by Harrison and Ari. Harrison, the assistant hutmaster, was in charge as Hutmaster Elizabeth Waste (whom I had met the summer before at Galehead) had already left for graduate school. With the

other two women on days off, it was an “all male” croo, a kind of throwback to the old days.

They were short-staffed and expecting a “full house,” so I was asked if I could help out. Luke had first suggested this during our brief trail encounter. They also asked if it was OK for me to sleep in the croo room. I was overjoyed at both propositions, but tried as best I could to act cool.

I always treaded lightly when I passed through a hut. Back when I was a hutman, we occasionally had unpleasant encounters with former croo who sometimes acted like they owned the place. I recall one time an OH (old hut croo member) thought my turkey carving skills inadequate and leapt up from a dining room table to insist he take over.

But now here, I was being asked to help and be part of the croo once again. Wow!

Hawkeye arrived, and we relaxed in the dining room, conversing easily as old friends do, while drinking tea and eating leftover cornbread. When Luke arrived, I proposed that the three of us hike up nearby Mount Madison. Hawkeye was working the next day, so he decided instead to head back down, and we warmly parted.

Luke and I were atop Madison in 19 minutes; the much fleetier Luke humored me by staying close. Clouds socked in the summit, portending rain, and, after a mandatory summit photo, we headed back down.

It was nearly 5 P.M., “go time,” when all the croo mobilize and get ready for 6 o’clock dinner. Luke asked me what we called it in the old days, and I didn’t remember the name—only the task! He didn’t know the expression “ding ’em down” either, but many other old hut terms have endured—such as getting food from the “mouse proof” in the “poop deck,” and heating water in the “Sammy.”

I put on a navy-blue hut apron (the old days’ basic white ones did not have these nice AMC logos!), and joined in on the work, a certain rhythm coming back, like the time I started speaking Arabic again after a 21-year absence from Morocco.

I was very aware that this Madison kitchen is sacred ground, the former domain of Tony MacMillan: legendary hutman, culinary master, founder of the Mount Madison Ski Patrol, and a special friend who had tragically died of cancer at a very young age.

Dinner was announced by a serenade of cooking pot drumming, and I quickly caught on and joined the fun. This was more clever than anything we did in the old days.

Luke asked me to help him serve soup, perhaps the sweetest moment of all. I could barely contain my joy as the two of us went from table to table, ladling out portions to opposite sides while asking if each person wanted a full bowl or some lesser fraction. This is an improvement from the old days when we just filled all the bowls automatically, generating unnecessary food waste.

Soup, salad, bread, and finally the main course itself all go out more or less on schedule. Under the apparent confusion of it all lies the basis of a good croo—teamwork. Everyone knows what has to be done and does it.

It was really, really fun. I brought out the food in serving dishes and refilled the water pitchers. We had help from a friendly female Appalachian Trail thru-hiker whom I christened with the trail name “Smiley.”

Before we served dessert, there was a welcome speech, including the suggestion to purchase AMC apparel and merchandise. In the old days, all we had were patches and guidebooks—now there are polypro shirts in various sizes and designs among other paraphernalia.

Next was introduction of the croo, and I proudly joined the three real croo as they gave their names and other information. Luke repeated a quote that I had read in *Backpacker*: “Hi, I’m Luke and one interesting fact about me is that I’ve gone skiing in Africa.”

I then introduced myself, adding, “One interesting fact about me is that I visited the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant one week ago today.”

Finally, the meal is history and the endless chore of clearing tables, washing dishes, and cleaning up begins.

I threw some dirty dishes in the sink, forgetting the mandatory task of “gorming,” using a rubber spatula (the kind used to put frosting on a cake) to remove excess food and thus preserve wash water quality. In the old days, we requested that guests help dry dishes, but this practice, long ago declared unsanitary by government health officials, has been replaced by air-drying racks.

Organized chaos ensued with the kitchen full of croo and AT thru-hikers who were helping in exchange for a meal and the right to spread a sleeping bag in the dining room. At one table, Ari, who had the official title of hut naturalist (no such person in the old days), gave a talk on bears. I grabbed some “croo chow” (the food was excellent!), and chatted with guests.

Soon, I was in bed in the croo room. I remembered my hut years:

You will soon be waking people and piercing nature's solitude, with the sounds of faucets running, beds creaking, and the chattering of hikers.

Ari was up early cooking, and the rest of us went to help. Morning rain portended a bad day on the ridge. When the radio call came, I wrote down the forecast of thunderstorm risk and read it to the guests as they finished breakfast and we cleared the dishes. A blanket folding demonstration included a plea for tips in the traditional "croo kitty" (now they just call it the tip box).

After we finished breakfast, I stood on a bench to reach the top bookshelf *Appalachia* collection, which was relatively sparse. I found a couple of issues with my articles, but not the one with "Ding 'Em Down."

I proposed to Luke a hike down into King Ravine and up one of my favorite trails, the Great Gully. Although the forecast was bad, it was my only chance.

First we had to clear and clean the hut. I swept and folded blankets. As I remembered from the old days, this was my least favorite part of the hut job. Wanting to get it done and over with, I pushed the others, the one time Luke snapped back and chewed me out. Finally, the work was done, but it was still raining, so I took a short nap.

At noon, Luke relented, despite the drizzle, and Harrison decided to join in as we set off down the Airline and the dramatic Chemin des Dames. They ran blissfully ahead while I did my best to keep up; the rocky descent was more difficult than I remembered, but mostly (surprisingly!) dry. The rain had stopped.

Great Gully was as great as ever with its waterfall and squeeze chimney to a dramatic perch above the falls, then the unrelenting steepness to treeline and Thunderstorm Junction, where Luke and Harrison were patiently waiting, immersed in conversation.

Despite the forecast, the weather had cleared and it was strikingly beautiful. The young guys headed back to the hut via the Gulfside, but I went up over Mount Adams, then slowly down the Star Lake Trail, enjoying the afternoon light and stopping to take out my rock climbing shoes to play on the boulders before attempting a "swim" in the lake's calf-deep water.

Back at the hut, it was almost "go time," with another full house, and I took on my usual tasks, with increased confidence and a sense of belonging. After dinner, I led an alpine flower walk in the beautiful late daylight, a throwback to my days as a botany graduate student at the University of Vermont. The alpine plants are like old friends, and, as I spotted each one, their colloquial

and Latin names rolled off my tongue from some deep part of my brain. The guests seemed to enjoy it, but surely not more than I.

Luke woke the guests the next morning with a guitar rendition of “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” a sweet personal moment for me only topped by the previous serving of the soup. During the croo’s breakfast skit, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*–like robot Luke insisted that astronaut Harrison fold his blankets correctly. The skits, aided by a plastic tub full of odd props and costumes, were a lot more inventive than the old days.

After breakfast, I chatted with one family who had spent two nights at the hut. They had a place in Randolph and had brought up their two young children for a mountain adventure. The mother glanced toward Luke, then said, “You did a lot of things right.” I think she saw the tears.

Probably *Backpacker* writer Bill Donahue was on to something when he observed that working in the huts has a Peter Pan quality: “You can stay on only as long as you remain young, unburdened by the worry and self-consciousness that crust on over time.”

For three fleeting days, I had been transported back in time, but now that time was up. The three-and-a-half hour hike out transformed me to reality. Occasional encounters with a joyous father and his two sons (each wearing the same red Madison Hut T-shirt that I, too, had bought) distracted me from my knee pain.

A few days later, Luke finished work for the summer and was home preparing for a semester abroad in Dublin. I had, somewhat cautiously, left a photocopy of “Ding ’Em Down” on his bed.

“Hey Dad, you know that article you wrote?” he inserted offhandedly into a conversation. “I read it and, you know, except for the part about the packing, it’s all really true.”

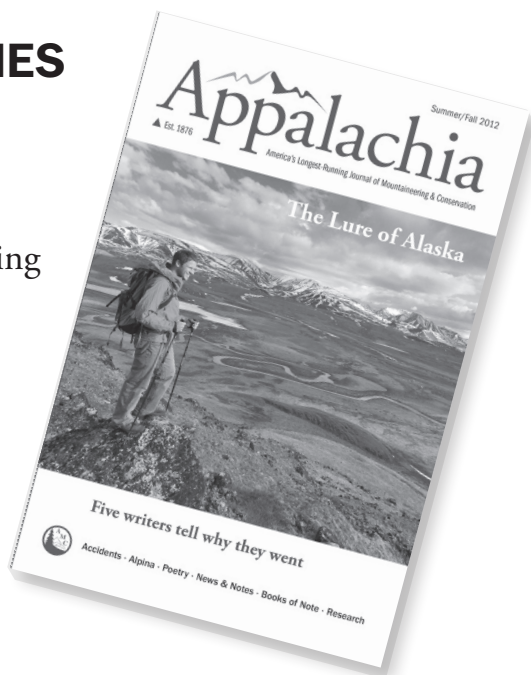
DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER has a long history of contributions to this journal, most recently “Running the Rope Out” in *Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2010 (vol. LXI no. 2). Although his permanent home is in the western White Mountains, Doug currently lives in Kiev, Ukraine, where he serves as the Peace Corps country director. His son, Luke, graduated from Ithaca College in 2011 and worked as assistant hutmaster at Lonesome Lake Hut.

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