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Letters

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Letters

Winter on Mount Washington

I found “Light Snow in the Whites” (Winter/Spring 2022) disturbing. My own experiences of winter hiking and camping were decades earlier than 1998, and limited to the Catskills, so milder, but cold enough, as I recall. I concluded that hiking that required crampons and ice axes was not for me.

What disturbed me in the Powerses’ story first was the “no room at the inn” situation at the observatory. The staff “implored” them “to rest briefly and quickly head back down” into the worsening storm. These polite New Englanders apparently did not ask to stay. Pushy New Yorkers would have, so my question is, how bad do conditions have to be before whatever custom or regulation gives way and “the public” who must be excluded becomes two fellow human beings who might very well not make it back alive?

A little further on, we encounter another candidate for the Accidents section, the young man out for a summer stroll in February. We are told he was with a group and the others, sensibly, turned back. Now faced with two spectral figures covered with snow and ice telling him to do the same, he continues on. Perhaps he was already hypothermic and not thinking clearly. Otherwise, mental illness is all I can conclude, and lacking police authority, they could not detain him. Does he in fact appear in the Accidents section?

Thanks to the Powerses for writing this cautionary tale for us all.

—Robert Roth
Kingston, New York

Editor’s note: I asked Charlie Buterbaugh, the director of communications at the Mount Washington Observatory, to respond. He says, “Mount Washington Observatory staff are no longer expected to do search and rescue. It was about ten years ago when we stopped offering this service, making sure that our weather observers can stay focused on maintaining our continuous 90-year climate record and weather and climate science. That being said, if someone is in desperate need and knocks on the observatory door in an emergency situation, we would assess the situation and collaborate with Mount Washington State Park staff to help the person remain safe. New Hampshire State Parks owns the Sherman Adams summit building, in which the Observatory is located, so our staff often work together.”

The Powers duo visited the building back in 1998, when the observatory staff were still also doing search and rescue. Our take on this is that the hikers were not in need of a rescue. They had the right gear, they were fit, and they were not too cold. The observatory staff told them, sensibly, to get off the mountain as quickly as they could, and the two took that advice.

We recommend a review of the safety principles at hikeSafe.com.

Our Accidents report in the following year did not publish anything about a lost or injured hiker on that day in March 1998. Our guess is that the man the Powerses saw on their descent turned around soon after they saw him.

The Influence of Mead Base in 1959

Many thanks to William Geller for the fine piece on Mead Wilderness Base (“A Line of Scouts,” Winter/Spring 2020). [Editor’s note: The camp is now called Mead Base. It was then known as New Hampshire Daniel Webster Council Boy Scouts of America Mead Wilderness Base Camp.] A week at Mead in the summer of 1959, when I was age 14, introduced me to the sport of what was then called “climbing”—hiking the Presidential Range and other high White Mountain peaks—and changed the course of my life. A few weeks later I returned with friends to re-hike Mount Washington; the following year I hiked from Franconia Notch to Pinkham Notch. I have spent a lifetime on trails in the Appalachians, the Sierras, Canyonlands, the Pacific Crest, the Rockies, and Alaska, for more than a half-century since that first hike.

Mead instructors emphasized certain fundamentals: hike together, everyone in the party has something to offer, check the map often, be scrumptiously clean in meal prep and cleanup, tie your bootlaces securely, ask every question you have. All this is testimony to the wisdom of teaching young people technical outdoor skills, while emphasizing self-respect and teamwork—and putting these into practice in a dramatic setting such as the Whites.

—Doug Dunlap
Farmington, Maine

Origins of the Diamond Hitch in AMC’s Construction Crew

I am writing to extol the virtues and describe the legacy of the diamond hitch, as noted in Bill Geller’s article, “Be Wary of the Hind-Leg Kick” (Winter/Spring 2022). His sentence about loading up a mule at Mead Base Scout camp in New Hampshire really struck a memorable chord in me: “The first

time the loads went on, they'd try to buck them off, but with diamond hitches holding the loads to the saddle, they stayed."

In 1968 after he completed his summer work at Mead Base leading backcountry trips, Bill Geller and I, along with his brother, John, did a weeklong backpacking trip on the Long Trail from Brandon Gap to Smuggler's Notch. For a pack on that trip, Bill had all his gear in a canvas sack tied on a homemade pack frame with a diamond hitch. He sang the praises of this clever hitch used by miners, prospectors, and other backwoods venturers on their mules: easy to tie without having to pull an end of rope through, adapts to any shape or size load, keeps the load from shifting, and a cinch to untie.

Two years later during my first summer working in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts, I was a member of the construction crew. At that time, the CC worked during the week doing renovations in the huts, and on weekends, we helped hut crews pack in supplies. As I began these pack trips and those for the CC work, I used the diamond hitch to tie on a secure load. I did not say much about it, although I noticed no one on the CC or the hut crews seemed to know this great hitch. As others saw that I tied my loads on quickly and they did not shift, they asked me to teach them the diamond hitch using the six hooks on the frame of AMC packboards. Its use spread, particularly that summer and among my crews during the next three at Mizpah Spring and Lakes of the Clouds huts. They subsequently taught the diamond hitch to their crews, too.

Over the years since then, when my wife and I stayed in the huts, it seemed as if the diamond hitch had become ubiquitous. I saw it on loaded packboards on the trails and at the huts. This series of events over more than 50 years from my learning the diamond hitch from Bill in 1968, to my teaching it to my fellow crew members from 1970 to 1973, and then seeing how its use had become widespread in recent years, reminded me how seemingly small actions or words can have lasting and unexpected legacies that we may only learn about years later. Those who inherit the legacy may not know from whom it came or when it started. My thanks to Bill for a most interesting article, and for starting me and the AMC crews on the path of using the diamond hitch.

—Bruce R. James
Lebanon, New Hampshire

A Call to Action to Upgrade White Mountain Trails

I enjoyed reading the Winter/Spring 2021 *Appalachia* articles about the mountains in a pandemic. Living in the White Mountains, I observed a big drop in visitors during COVID's early days in March and April 2020. I even witnessed the Kancamagus Highway's Lincoln Woods parking lot 100 percent empty one day! But, by summer 2020, things changed radically. Pent-up demand, the relatively low risk of transmission outdoors, and the loss of indoor recreation (such as museums, gyms, and theaters) drove high levels of visitors to the Whites. Trailhead parking lots overflowed, including Lincoln Woods, with many cars parked along the highway. There were reports of illegal camping and lots of waste left in the woods. Sales of New Hampshire fishing and hunting licenses were way up, too.

I have been reflecting on this in light of my article in that same issue on building the trail up the Hancocks in the 1960s ("The Hancock Loop Trail, Then and Now"). There are so many more people in the mountains now, with enormous pressure on the most popular trails, especially the most direct ones to the 4,000-footers. (People love their lists!)

The Appalachian Mountain Club has been a leader in trail hardening going back to the pioneering efforts by my friend Robert Proudman up through the excellent leadership by the recently deceased Andrew Norkin. But despite many outstanding efforts by our AMC trail crews and volunteers, we just aren't keeping up with the growing levels of use and resulting severe erosion at high elevations.

It is great that so many people are getting outdoors, and we certainly want to encourage that! But we need to do more to preserve our precious resource.

I was thinking about this during a recent hike up the Gorge Brook Trail on Moosilauke, my local mountain. I remember in the 1960s when the upper part of that trail went straight up the slope, but many years back, the Dartmouth Outing Club, which maintains it, made the decision to do a complete reroute of the upper section with switchbacks and heavy investment in rock steps and drainage. I think this is the model we need going forward for all of the popular, high-elevation trails.

Yes, AMC has built many rock steps and water bars, but these are mostly to reduce erosion on existing trails. As I wrote in my article, such efforts on the Hancocks have been overwhelmed by the steep slope and heavy traffic. It is sad to see the remnants of such positive attempts by our skilled trail crews. We have been trying hard, but it is just not enough.

I call on AMC to revisit our commitment and adopt a new paradigm, beginning by assessing every popular trail we maintain and developing a long-term plan that adopts the model DOC applied to the Gorge Brook Trail. This will require extensive re-routes with more traversing and switchbacks and heavy investment in rock steps and drainage.

This will be very expensive, but it is necessary. This should be the highest priority for our club moving forward, and I encourage the AMC leadership to put our expertise and resources, including fundraising, to bear on this critically important task.

Fifty years from now, we can have trails in better shape than they are today for the benefit of many future generations. But we need to act now and do so boldly.

—*Douglass P. Teschner*
Pike, New Hampshire

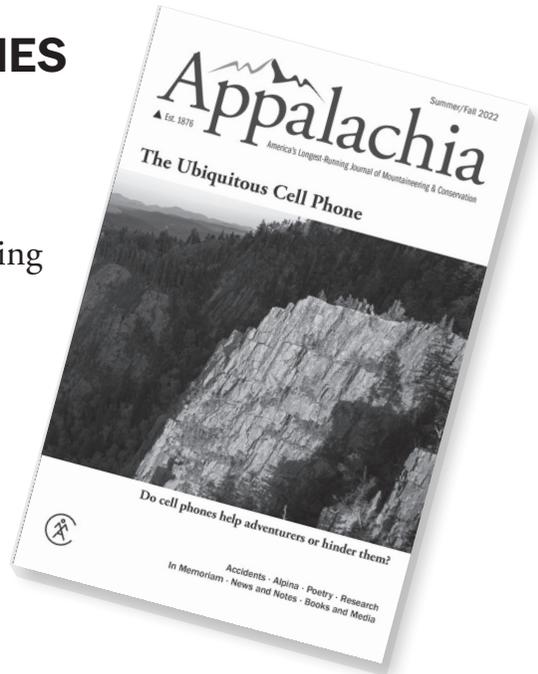
Editor's note: Doug Teschner is a member of the Appalachia Committee. Contact him at dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com.

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