

2011

White Mountains, 1964: 25 Impressions

Guy Waterman

George Bellerose

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Recommended Citation

Waterman, Guy and Bellerose, George (2011) "White Mountains, 1964: 25 Impressions," *Appalachia*: Vol. 62: No. 2, Article 10.

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White Mountains, 1964

25 impressions

Guy Waterman | Photos by George Bellerose



THESE 25 IMPRESSIONS GIVE A PAINTERLY VIEW OF GUY WATERMAN'S White Mountain trip made with his son, Bill, and nephew, Tim Carney, in 1964. They traveled from Stamford, Connecticut, by train and bus, spending the first night at the Indian Head Motel in Franconia Notch. Then the trio traversed the Whites through the Appalachian Mountain Club's huts system, from Lonesome Lake Hut (August 28) to Carter Notch Hut (September 7).

This was Guy's first encounter with the White Mountains. The contact was electrifying, as we can see from the freshness of his writing and his eagerness to climb everything in sight: a romp up Hale from Zealand Hut; tracing back over Adams and Jefferson, which they'd had to bypass in a storm; eschewing the Crawford Path for the much longer but more exciting Webster Cliffs Trail to reach Lakes of the Clouds Hut. Though Guy could not have known in 1964 how these mountains were to shape his life, by the early 1970s he had extricated himself from New York City to live closer to the range without which he found he could not exist.

He went on to write books with me about their history (*Forest and Crag* [Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 1989], *Yankee Rock & Ice* [Stackpole Books, 1993]) and the importance of keeping them wild (*Wilderness Ethics* and *Backwoods Ethics* [Countryman Press, 1993]). He ended his life on Mount Lafayette on a cold day in February 2000.

George Bellerose's photographs, taken a decade later, capture the spirit of what Guy found there with Bill and Tim on their landmark adventure. Guy wrote the notes that follow in a pocket-sized spiral notebook.

—Laura Waterman

... superb views down on Lonesome Lake.

1. Friday night. The sky full of stars, seen on arriving at Notch in the undiluted night air, an incredible number of individual stars seemed visible, some bright, some faint. The sky background was pure black, not dark blue. The whole canopy very near above us. An entirely different sky from that seen around cities.

2. Saturday morning. The first sight of the mountains. From where we were, the whole chain of the Franconia Range rose in succeeding summits—Flume nearby; the knotted [sic] top of Liberty; then, beyond, the three upsweeping cones of Little Haystack, Lincoln, and farthest away in remote isolation, Lafayette.

3. Saturday afternoon. An icy swim in Cascade Brook. After tramping 6½ miles, we were on a trail which climbed alongside a cascading brook, with falls and pools alternating repeatedly. The water was cold but bearable. The feeling exhilarating, revitalizing, a rebirth of energy and enthusiasm for the final 2½ miles. The White Mountains have many such brooks, which produce a chain of possible swimming holes as they descend the sides of the hills. The big obstacle is the water temperature, but under 3,000 feet this is generally bearable.



... a cascading brook, with falls and pools alternating repeatedly. NINETEEN-MILE BROOK

4. Sunday morning. The Franconia Range, seen from across the Notch. Climbing the Hi-Cannon Trail from Lonesome Lake, the morning view across the Notch revealed the main summits in full glory, especially Lincoln. Their long sweeping flanks, gleaming where the sun hit wet rock slabs. Also from this trail were superb views down on Lonesome Lake. This is clearly the best route up Cannon.

5. Sunday morning. Our first taste of being the object of tourist attention. On the summit of Cannon Mtn., crowded with Sunday tourists brought up by the Aerial Tramway, we were smugly aware of tourist parents pointing us out to tourist children, with our heavy packs and all-business airs.

6. Sunday afternoon. Bill's hitting his stride. Came on the 2,100-foot climb to Greenleaf Hut. Our first major climb. After having already climbed 1,200 feet up Cannon and descended 2,000 feet to the Notch. Up along-side Eagle Cliff, through Eagle Pass, then on up the great western shoulder of Lafayette, Bill repeatedly pulled far in front of Tim and I, showing wholly unexpected up-hill going power, which he continued to exhibit in succeeding days.

7. Sunday evening. Lafayette from Greenleaf. Unquestionably one of the most awe-inspiring scenes in the White Mtns. From the western shoulder of Lafayette, 4,000 feet up, the entire wall—Lafayette's north peak, Lafayette itself, Lincoln, Little Haystack—towers above, the long flanks plunging 3,000 feet everywhere but on the narrow col connecting the Western shoulder with Lafayette. The four summits connected by a wildly broken knife-edge ridge. Especially dramatic at sunset of a near-cloudless evening, gaunt against a darkening sky, brooding in awesome power over a tiny inconsequential shack-full of people sitting on its side.

8. Monday morning. Lafayette's summit in storm. A storm of rain hit the whole Franconia region, so that the hut cautioned against venturing up on the wild ridge of Lafayette. We decided to move, and crawled through the fog from one barely visible cairn to the next (above tree line at this point). On the summit, rain, wind, and cold drove us on quickly, with little time to savor our first 5,000 footer & no view at all. On the knife-edge leading to Lafayette's North Peak, the storm reached its worst. But as we descended the eastern side, we emerged from the storm and into sunshine eventually, tho the top of Lafayette remained shrouded by a storm cloud all day as we looked back.



... we emerged from the storm and into sunshine....

9. Monday night. Sleeping out at Galehead. Since Galehead Hut was overcrowded with an unexpected gang of Boy Scouts, we dragged mattresses out on the front steps. A thunderstorm, with lightning flashing over South Twin, got the blankets somewhat wet, but we stayed relatively dry, if cold toward morning.

10. Tuesday morning. Timmy's hitting his stride. The morning before, Tim had demonstrated a surprising second wind near the top of Lafayette under the most forbidding climbing conditions. Today, after dragging up South Twin, he took over the lead on a very fast 2 miles from South Twin along the ridge to Mt. Guyot. From now on, all of us were in fine shape and moving fast. While Bill is the faster uphill, Tim sets our pace downhill.

11. Tuesday morning. The summit of Mt. Guyot swept by wind and fog. Another forbidding morning, to be followed by clearing and a gorgeous afternoon. As we reached the rocky summit pyramid of Guyot, the wind reached terrific force, literally making it hard to keep our feet. With the fog clouds racing by us, rock outcrops would appear then be enveloped in cloud, then reappear. As dramatic a scene, almost ghostlike, as any yet met.

12. Tuesday noon. Carrigan [sic] Mtn., seen from the North. Descending along the rim of Zealand ridge, with the clouds finally dispersed in most directions, fine views were seen. Almost due south of us lay Carrigan [sic] Mtn., an almost ideally shaped mountain for, say, an artist's concept of what a mountain should be like. On the east it swoops up from a precipitous notch dividing it from the next range, rising first to a large subpeak (Vose Spur), then another swoop up to the summit. On the West it drops back, but not nearly so far down. The North Face appears to plunge in one long, wide slope to the valley below.

13. Tuesday afternoon. The surprise view from Hale Mtn. Having arrived early at Zealand Falls, we dumped our packs and took a 5-mile walk up Hale Mtn. & back, mainly to take in another 4,000 footer. We did not expect much of the peak itself. Our prize was all the more rewarding, therefore, because it was not expected. The views from Hale were one great panorama of the mountains on the horizon, rolling wooded rises and valleys nearby, the latter appearing soft and rich in every shade of green. To the East, our first view of the Mt. Washington uplift, now maybe 15 miles off—a massive bulk, grey-white (being above tree line), dominated by Washington itself.

14. Tuesday evening. Swimming at Zealand Falls. Not having any swims (or baths) at Greenleaf or Galehead, we rushed up to the pools under Zealand Falls for both recreational & hygienic purposes. The water turned out to be



Since Galehead Hut was overcrowded... we dragged mattresses out on the front steps.

VIEW OF GALEHEAD HUT FROM GALEHEAD MOUNTAIN

so cold that we barely could get in without turning numb. We all got in by various degrees, though the boys never fully submerged.

15. Tuesday night – Wednesday morning. Zealand Falls Hut, without crowds. This was the first hut where we had been in a small group, the others all having one large party or another. Wonderful company. Included were a couple of guitar-carrying types who led singing for a while. The hut has an organ (!) carried up piece by piece and assembled there, which I fooled around with. One of our party is a 72-year-old hiker, who looks 50, and who takes a daily morning swim in water which we were barely able to endure in mid-afternoon. The best crowd (or lack of crowd) hit yet.

16. Wednesday evening – Thursday morning. The contrast of Crawford House. After the happy, informal hospitality of the huts, Crawford House was an even more unpleasant contrast than anticipated. A millionaire's rest home, staffed by aging and wilted employees, and not really situated in an especially scenic spot (tho a few miles in any direction the views are fine). Everyone here looked sad and alone. A relief to be off on the trail again on Thursday morning.

17. Thursday morning. Webster Cliff Trail. This trail climbs 2,600 feet up the long side of Webster Mountain, along the edge of the cliffs over Crawford



... rolling wooded rises ... appearing soft and rich in every shade of green. THE TWINWAY



Spectacular views at all points MOUNTS CHERRY AND MARTHA

Notch. Spectacular views at all points, both long (south toward Carrigan [sic], across the notch toward Willey, Field, and Tom) and short (out across the cliffs, then later down them). A challenging climb too: 2,600 feet up from the notch to the summit.

18. Thursday afternoon. Above tree line. The first long climb above tree line came this afternoon as we crossed the subpeaks southwest of Washington, heading for Lakes of the Clouds hut. The afternoon was clear and bright, but the wind was very high and blustery. We had our first taste of what the Presidential Range supplies that the lesser ranges cannot—the continuous sense of high altitude with great drops of thousands of feet into the ravines on all sides, and the views ever present, because of being above tree line.

19. Friday morning. Sunrise from Monroe. The 5th highest summit, Mt. Monroe is a friendly peak, a half mile and 400 feet above the Lakes Hut. Easily climbed before breakfast, at which time the sun is coming up behind Washington. This morning, to the right (south) of the huge Washington pyramid, a cloud bank down to just above the horizon kept the sky dark to that point. Below this bank, however, a brilliant band of color stretched south, starting with a golden orange in the east and fading as it swept southward, ultimately tailing off in a soft rose glow turning to faint grey by the time it reached due south.



... the continuous sense of high altitude MOUNT CHOCORUA

20. Friday morning and afternoon. Gulfside Trail in storm. A true taste of “White Mountain weather.” After we had climbed Washington through a harmless cloud, the wind came up suddenly and, crossing Mt. Clay, a full-dress hail-storm hit us hard. Then after a brief respite, the wind came up again, this time with driving rain, and the visibility sunk to less than 50 feet, sometimes much less. For the first day, I was forced to take over the lead. We abandoned any attempt to go over Jefferson or Adams that day, simply pushing through to Madison Spring Hut. Because of the weather, there were only 7 others at the Hut.

21. Saturday morning. Madison at sunrise. The summit of Madison is a turning-point. Looking back, the full splendor of the top Presidentials stands in review. Looking on north, the ground drops swiftly to gentle hills and valleys thousands of feet lower down. This morning all the valleys were blanketed

with low fleecy clouds. Higher, less friendly clouds moved above the horizon. The summit of Washington remained veiled for over half an hour I was up. The sun intruded on this scene slowly, coming out of a cloud bank first as a red tip, then gradually filling out into a full sphere turning into a blinding orange by the time it finally appeared.

22. Saturday morning. Adams in wind and fog. With the weather so thick that cairn-finding presented a real problem, plus wind so high that holding one's footing was precarious (and nearly impossible right at the summit), we made it over Mt. Adams, 2nd only to Washington in height and to none in grandeur. An enormous cone of rough boulders. Of course, we had no views beyond 50 feet at best, but the feeling of great height was present, even huddled in the lea [sic] of the summit rock.

23. Saturday morning. The weather lifting, as seen from Jefferson. As suddenly as "White Mountain Weather" can attack the unsuspecting, just as swiftly can it release its victims and reveal the mountains' grandeur, equally unsuspected a moment before. As we approached Jefferson from Adams, we began to get sudden brief partings of the clouds with gigantic views down into the ravines. When we reached the top of Jefferson, tho the wind was still wild, visibility was greatly improved. Then as we went out on Jefferson's knee, the whole panorama from that spot, perhaps the best single vantage point in the Presidentials, was laid out before us—the Great Gulf leading toward Clay & Washington to the south, Jefferson's Ravine & the half-mile high wall of Adams incredibly close to the north, Jefferson behind us, and the broad valley leading to the Carters before us.

24. Saturday noon. The "Six Husbands" Trail. Why would the most interesting trail of the trip have such a peculiar name? Tho we came down, it would be best to do this from the bottom up. Rising straight up Jefferson's knee from the Great Gulf, it passes first thru beautiful evergreen-dominated woods; then through a fascinating labyrinth of boulders and rock slabs, actually tunneling through caves in the process; then suddenly emerges on the top of the knee, with the Presidentials' Big Three laid out before it—Washington seen across the Great Gulf, Adams in lofty majesty across the terrific drop of Jefferson Ravine, Jefferson on up ahead. From there, the trail goes straight on to the summit of Jefferson, 3rd highest summit of the Northeast.



Two small lakes are somehow wedged into this same notch CARTER LAKE

25. Saturday night – Sunday morning. Carter Notch. Along with Greenleaf, this hut has the most striking mountain scenery. Cut deep between Wildcat and Carter Dome, with steep sides rising 1000 feet on both sides. Two small lakes are somehow wedged into this same notch—beautiful settings. To the south, the valley sweeps down, mile on mile. Both Wildcat and Carter are interesting climbs, short but steep. At the southwestern foot of Carter, at the Notch, is a large field strewn with boulders, which have formed endless tunnels and whole caves to explore.

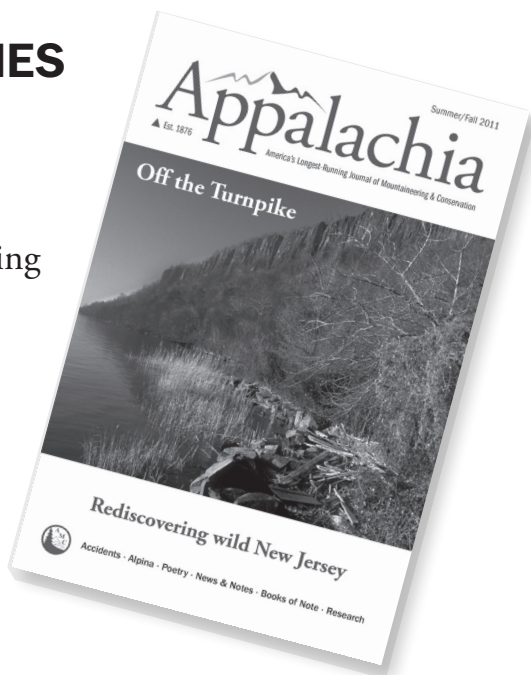
GUY WATERMAN was a writer, musician, climber, and homesteader, who lived for three decades in East Corinth, Vermont, before his death in 2000. Writer and former climber LAURA WATERMAN continues to live near their homestead. She is the author of a memoir, *Losing the Garden* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), and is at work on a novel.

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