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PSU exhibit: Women in the White Mountains blazed their own trails

PLYMOUTH — Miriam Underhill loved technical climbing in the White Mountains at a time when women didn't often do such things.

But when she scaled rock faces with her husband and their friends, she wasn't allowed to be the lead climber. So she decided to climb with groups of women, and, in 1925, she penned an article for an Appalachian Mountain Club journal called "Manless Climbing."

"She really enjoyed rock climbing, but at that time, the men would always take the lead," said Dr. Marcia Schmidt Blaine, a history professor at Plymouth State University and the interim director of the Museum of the White Mountains.

Underhill, whose maiden name was O'Brien, lived in Randolph with her family. A photograph of her scaling rocks is one of the displays at the new exhibit, "Taking the Lead: Women and the White Mountains" at the Museum of the White Mountains at Plymouth State University. The exhibit will be open to the public until October.

The White Mountains were a "freeing" place for women, Blaine said, where women in the Northeast began experimenting with more loose clothing from the waist down. They had to do so, Blaine said, because climbing in dresses of the past two centuries was difficult.

"The White Mountains was a place where women could try things they were never able to try in urban areas," she said.

The exhibit features more than 100 pieces of art, and provides stories of dozens of women climbers. Most are stories from the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Plymouth State students of all majors contributed to the display, Blaine said. Several female students recorded audio tracks, reading from the writings of women hikers like Louisa May Alcott, for visual displays.

Alcott, who is famous for writing "Little Women," visited the White Mountains in 1861, and wrote of the splendor of the areas that were "undisturbed."

Among the exhibits is a recent photograph of Rebecca Fullerton, a librarian and archivist at the AMC Library. Fullerton is also a women's hiking historian who loves the White Mountains.

Next to her photograph at the exhibit is a full women's outfit from a century ago, made of

heavy wool. She made the outfit, Blaine said, and hiked the White Mountains in it in 2015.

"I'm sure it was very hot to climb in clothes like that," Blaine said. "At the time, climbing in heavy clothes was the difference between proper and improper."

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