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State trail system gets its due at PSU

To the uninitiated, perhaps, a trail is a trail and it's there and that's that.

But the fact that a trail even exists leads the inquisitive hiker to ponder its genesis and the places to which it leads, and to wonder when it was created and why it's still here.

In New Hampshire's White Mountains, if it wasn't built by the state, or a White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) crew, odds are that the trail you're hiking on was built by members of a trail club, most often volunteers, and they are also the ones responsible for the fact that the trail continues to serve backcountry travelers and hasn't just washed away, a victim of erosion.

The historical, practical, and cultural importance of the state's trail clubs is the focus of a new exhibit at Plymouth State University's (PSU's) Museum of the White Mountains. Set to run through March 6, 2016, the exhibit is titled "Trail Clubs: Connecting People with the Mountains," and it celebrates the contributions of trail clubs to the state's vast network of hiking trails.

Those contributions often come in the form of time, toil, muscle, and sweat as club members, drawn together by a love of the outdoors and outdoor exploration, band together for the common good to, as the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) saying goes, "give something back to the backcountry."

Featuring such vintage objects as carved, wooden trail signs, hiking guides and maps, even an early 20th century goat skin guest register from the Randolph Mountain Club's (RMC's) Crag Camp, the exhibit is rich with artifacts illustrating the role and works of trail clubs from the late 1800s to the current day.

A highlight is an authentic Adirondack-style log shelter donated by John Nininger of The Wooden House Company in Wells River, Vt., and assembled in the museum by past and present AMC staff. The shelter is destined to be taken apart and reassembled for hikers' use in northern New Hampshire by the Cohos Trail Association (CTA).

The exhibit is built around three themes, according to the museum's website:

"1. Sense of Place: Trail clubs help people connect not just to the activity of hiking but also to

the club's local region and the White Mountain region as a whole.

2. Sense of Purpose: Trail clubs leverage their resources and the resources of their members to create and maintain trails, educate visitors, and advocate for natural spaces.

3. Sense of Belonging: Trail clubs create opportunities for people to be part of a community and socialize with others."

Museum Director Catherine Amidon led the project, which was curated by Ben Amsden, director of PSU's Center for Rural Partnerships author and publisher Mike Dickerman, owner of Bondcliff Books and author Steve Smith, owner of The Mountain Wanderer Map and Book Store in Lincoln. Smith and Dickerman are co-editors of AMC's White Mountain Guide.

The three have each contributed a chapter on the exhibit's themes to an online exhibit guide. Writing about the "Sense of Purpose" theme, Smith acknowledges several trail clubs drawn to exploration and stewardship of the trails, from the first recorded group to focus on exploring the White Mountains (the Portland, Maine-based White Mountain Club, which existed from 1873 to 1884) to the Shelburne Trails Club, formed in 2010 to restore trails in the lower Mahoosucs.

Smith underscores the importance of the various clubs' work in maintaining trails, referencing the crush of hikers heading for the mountains in recent decades: "many of the early trails were not designed with heavy use in mind.

When hiking activity boomed in the 1960s, many steep trails deteriorated into washed-out gullies. Brown swaths of trampled turf spread across the alpine tundra. In response, clubs devised new techniques - drainage control, bog bridging, rock steps, trail definition in the alpine zone - to combat erosion and lighten the tread of thousands of Vibram-soled feet."

Writing on "Sense of Place," Dickerman, likewise, acknowledges the importance of trail clubs' contributions. Referencing the publication by some clubs of trail guides to help hikers navigate the terrain, he writes:

"Indeed, guidebooks have been commonly used by many of the region's trail clubs through the years, and early editions of these guides offer today's historians an accurate glimpse back to the day when the region's extensive trail network was still a work in progress.

More importantly, however, the preparation of these guidebooks has been an essential service provided by the various trail clubs and has broadened their outreach and further tied the clubs to specific geographical sections of the White Mountains."

Regarding the "Sense of Belonging" theme, Amsden notes, "Trail clubs mean many things to

many people," but he also maintains that to some, ".the clubs that support and maintain the hiking trails of New Hampshire help develop a sense of belonging - the sense that one is a 'member' who developed a sense of community based on special places, meaningful activities, and a shared experience."

In the introduction to the exhibit guide, active RMC member Doug Mayer notes the vast array of trail clubs now active in the region, including such entities as the Wonalancet Out Door Club, Chatham Trails Association, Dartmouth Outing Club, Waterville Valley Athletic and Improvement Association, Trailwrights, Squam Lakes Association, Chocorua Mountain Club, CTA, RMC, and AMC. "This variety brings enormous strength to the enduring work of mountain stewardship in the region," he writes. Mayer also acknowledges the longstanding cooperative relationships between trail clubs and the WMNF.

A long list of current trail maintainers, including private organizations and government agencies, such as the WMNF, the Society for the protection of New Hampshire Forests, and New Hampshire's Division of Forests & Lands and Division of Parks & Recreation, is also included in the guide. The guide is downloadable from the museum's website, plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains/.

Mayer started working in the White Mountains more than 30 years ago, and in the intervening years, he has climbed in such far-flung places as the Alps. "This exposure led to a greater perspective and appreciation," he writes. "It has led me to understand just how rich our local trail club history is, here in the White Mountains. It rivals any mountain range in the world." The Museum of the White Mountains is located at 34 Highland St. in Plymouth. Hours are Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. The museum is closed on Mondays and university holidays. See plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains or call 535-3210 for more information.

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