

Taking the Lead in NH's White Mountains

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Walk 'O the Range, AMC Walk, 1917 (from Appalachian Mountain Club Library & Archives)

Day Tripping

Taking the Lead in NH's White Mountains

By Kathi Caldwell-Hopper

"In occasional times of strain, just to walk in the hills brings a strengthening of the spirit, a renewed courage and buoyancy."

— Quotation from Miriam O'Brien Underhill, White Mountain hiker

Maybe it was the old photo of a woman dressed in long skirt and jaunty little hat, her booted feet floating out over the air as she perched atop an incredibly steep cliff. I wondered who she might be, and how she managed to climb onto the ledge in a long skirt and leather boots.

Or perhaps it was the sepia-toned image of two women standing atop a rocky mountaintop, hands on hips, wearing (for the time period) daring cotton bloomers, high boots, men's shirts and ties. Their heads were covered against the sun; one wore a scarf tied gypsy fashion to cover her hair and the other sported a floppy-brimmed man's hat. Both women

were young and full of life; they stared boldly into the camera, I-dare-you-to-tell-me-I-can't-climb-a-mountain expressions on their faces.

When surfing the internet the other day, I came across those images and discovered they are just a few from the collection from a wonderful exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains in Plymouth. The exhibit is aptly titled *Taking the Lead: Women and the White Mountains*. I browsed the images on the museum's website and was impressed with the many photos of women and historical information from various time periods in the White Mountains.

But it was the photo of the two young women that really sealed the deal for me. (Turns out the photograph is titled Walk O' the Range, AMC Walk, 1917 courtesy the Appalachian Mountain Club Library and Archives.) It wasn't so much to learn who the women were that led me to drive to Plymouth to see the exhibit, but rather the courage and spirit they embodied that made me want to learn more.

The subject matter is unusual and I have seldom seen an exhibit on the subject of women from various time periods that, in their own ways, conquered mountains. Because I previously visited the museum during the winter and wrote about an earlier exhibit, it might seem too soon to write about the same place once again. But *Taking the Lead* is on display through the summer, and I want those planning their warm-weather trips to know now about the exhibit so they can add it to their itinerary. (The exhibit is open through October 7, 2016).

The Museum of the White Mountains is located on Highland Street in downtown Plymouth. It is a wonderful place (it was formerly a church) that has been completely redesigned to serve as a spacious, airy museum. Admission is free, and the museum is part of Plymouth State University. (PSU students work at the museum and help plan and research the exhibits.)

I drove to Plymouth on a sunny mid-May Saturday afternoon, excited to see the entire exhibit that I was told features lots of White Mountain memorabilia, information on women hikers from the 1800s and 1900s, as well as today, and some wonderful White Mountain paintings by *female* artists.

The White Mountain School of Painting has given us some beautiful paintings, with northern NH scenes captured in oil on canvas from the early to late 1800s. But the paintings are almost always done by male artists; it was interesting to read that there were indeed some female artists tramping over the White Mountains all those years ago, hitching up their long skirts and scaling rocks and risking life and limb to reach distant, scenic areas to capture the views on canvas.

As I entered the exhibit, the docent at the front desk suggested I speak with the museum's director, Marcia Schmidt Blaine (Marcia co-curated *Taking the Lead* with Cynthia Robinson). Marcia took time out of her busy day to talk about the exhibit and share some of what she learned as she researched and gathered information on women in the White Mountains.

"First, it is important to remember that you are looking at gender, place and leadership when viewing this exhibit," she said. Lest one imagine this is an exhibit that preaches women were downtrodden and found a way to overcome obstacles in a man's world that is not the case at all. As Marcia says, the exhibit is about women taking the lead in their own way, but not taking it *away* from men.

I liked the idea, that women in days past, and today, found ways to forge their own paths in the White Mountains, for their own reasons. It reminded me of the sepia photograph of the two young women standing on the mountaintop, hands on hips, directly looking into the camera as if to say, "There! We climbed this mountain, and we did it our own way!"

In the huge gallery room, it was difficult to know where to go first, because I saw lots of beautiful landscape paintings as well as old photos and some vignette areas.

I started with the wall nearest the entrance where information told me about the exhibit. “The White Mountains have given women the opportunity to discover their own strengths. Women have hiked through scrub, hauled timber, contemplated great heights, painted the valleys, sketched the flowers, written of their mountain summers, camped on the ground, and discovered immense joy in accomplishment. Women have taken the lead, making a welcome path for others to follow – and to take up the lead themselves.”

Nearby, a gorgeous landscape painting just had to be by an artist working in the White Mountains in the 1800s. But as I got closer, I read that Jackson-area artist Lauren Sansaricq did the painting, titled Crawford Notch, in 2015. It just goes to show the women of the mountains are full of surprises, as much so today as in years gone by.

A wonderful photograph on an opposite wall showed a young woman sitting on a huge rock, her feet seeming to hang in mid air. It was the photo I had seen previously, and wondered about. The caption information under the large photo told me it was a woman named Margaret E. Goodrich (Norton) on Mt. Monroe in August of 1912. I love that Margaret climbed out onto the ledge and allowed her photo to be taken; the image speaks of accomplishment, daring and a willingness to share her joy with others.



Margaret E. Goodrich on Mount Monroe, 1912

(courtesy Nathaniel Scrimshaw)

A small table with stereoscopic viewers and postcards invited visitors to Please Touch. This was 3-D entertainment long before the advent of television or movie theatres. Many of the cards produced and sold at the time were White Mountain scenes, bringing the remote mountains into parlors around the world.

I was drawn to a mannequin wearing an old-fashioned outfit and read that it was a “visually accurate reproduction of a garment Lucy Crawford would have worn circa 1826.” It was a nice outfit, but even so, it brought home to me how restrictive garments for women were at that time. “Climb a hill, let alone a mountain, in that long dress?” I asked myself. Quite an accomplishment, but women were doing it all the time when they tackled the mountains in the 1800s.

Lucy Crawford fast became my heroine, when I read that she was a leader in a lot of ways. She lived a difficult life in a remote area and she rose above the problems of the location by becoming an early innkeeper, as well as one of the first

women to climb Mount Washington. When we think of climbing the big mountain, we imagine it as it is today, with hiking trails and help never far away. But Lucy climbed it at a time when it was remote and there were no cell phones, other hikers or well-marked hiking trails. One slip in her long skirt and ladylike boots could have spelled disaster.

I was further enchanted by a photo of an older lady, laden down with lots of hiking and camping gear. In spite of her heavy load, she looks into the distance, perhaps at her beloved White Mountains, her face wreathed in a gentle, slightly ironic smile. "So what if I am older and this load is heavy?" she seems to say. "I can handle it!" The woman is Emilie Klug and the photo by Harold Orne was taken around 1930. Emilie hiked alone, information by the photo told me. She hiked the mountains for three to four weeks every summer and carried everything she needed in a pinned-up skirt around her waist. She camped in all kinds of weather, but she clearly loved the mountains and never was known to complain of rain or other inclement conditions. An AMC hut master said of Emilie, "She carried her own sunshine with her."



Emilie Klug, circa 1930, photo by Harold Orne;

courtesy Mount Washington Observatory.

More old photographs showed women of all ages taking to the White Mountains, and I found it all charming, as well as enlightening. I had no idea women spent so much time hiking the mountains at a time when I assume they were all parlor-and-tea-party-bound to their homes.

But the exhibit had more in store, when I rounded a corner and saw another mannequin dressed in a long cream-colored skirt, white blouse, over jacket and a man's hat. A little trunk next to the mannequin was charming and a sign above it said Mary Perkins Osgood was the trunk's owner, and it was loaned courtesy of the grandchildren of Mary Perkins Osgood Cutter.

A photo in a gold frame showed a woman dressed in a lacy collared Victorian-era dress. She had a gentle, but direct gaze, clearly not afraid of whom she was.

The little photo was surrounded by large images of flowers done (I think) in watercolor. The paintings were all of plants and flowers and they were gorgeous, especially the purple Iris. Mary was a summer resident of Randolph, NH and a skilled botanist and artist. In her mountain environment, she spent time studying and drawing wildflowers; she painted an amazing 244 watercolors of plants and flowers during her summer visits.

Most of all, I was impressed with the far wall that displayed many White Mountain scenic paintings. These were White Mountain School paintings in individual styles as unique as each female artist. Old-time farms, mountain peaks, babbling streams, and even a bold drawing by Maria a'Becket of a waterfall executed in charcoal, the various moods and places of the White Mountains was all there before me. It was amazing to read that most were done by female artists. Where were all these paintings, I wondered, when other galleries did White Mountain School exhibits?

Lastly, I took time to view paintings and other artwork by modern-day women included in the exhibit.

The quote from NH resident Penny Pitou, well known as an Olympic medal skier who loves hiking in the mountains, echoes what women from all walks of life, from olden days to today, love about the White Mountains. Said Penny, "For me, the mountains are my inspiration."

Thus it was also with early settler Lucy Crawford, who carved out a life and livelihood in the remote mountains, and dedicated hiker Emilie Klug, and the artists who brought the beauty of the area to those living far away.

In their own way, each woman took the lead and made the mountains her own.

The Museum of the White Mountains is located at 34 Highland Street in Plymouth, NH. Admission is free and the gallery is open Monday through Friday from 10 am to 4 pm and on Saturday from 11 am to 4 pm, closed Sunday. For information, call 535-3210 or visit <http://www.plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains/>.