

Women of the White Mountains

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Three women at summit. From left: Hazel Peek, [unidentified], Theodora Beckwith. Courtesy of Ginny Folsom Umiker.

Women have always been drawn to the White Mountains. What surprises people is how many women have been leaders in shaping the region. The mountainous land gave women a place to explore their talents and creativity uninhibited by the constraints of urban life.

The newest exhibition at the Museum of the White Mountains explores this history. It's called, *Taking The Lead: Women and the White Mountains*.

Miriam O'Brien Underhill (1898-1976)



Miriam O'Brien Underhill ascends a chimney up a cliff in 1929 – photo courtesy of the Underhill family collection

Miriam O'Brien Underhill learned to love the White Mountains from her mountaineering mother. She began climbing in the 1920s, and in 1926 turned her attention to climbing the Alps. In Europe, she felt stymied until she realized that she could learn more by taking the lead. Miriam turned to “manless climbing” and her essay, “*Manless alpine climbing: the First Woman to Scale the Grépon, the Matterhorn and Other Famous Peaks Without Masculine Support*” was published by National Geographic in 1934. It would explain her philosophy:

“Very early, I realized that the person who invariably climbs behind a good leader...may never really learn mountaineering at all and in any case enjoys only part of the varied delights and rewards of climbing. ... I did realize that if women were really to lead, that is, to take the entire responsibility for the climb, there couldn't be any man at all in the party.”

Through all of her adventures, the White Mountains remained Miriam's “first love.” Her climbs and writings made her a role model for the next generation of female climbers.

Ann Sophia Towne Darrah (1819-1881)

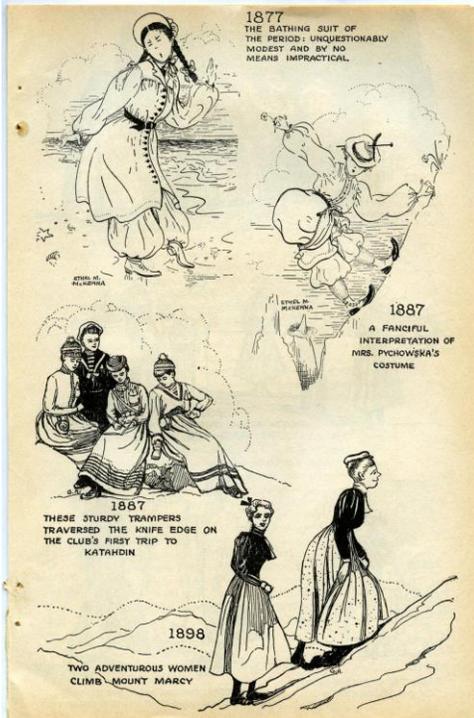


Mt. Washington, 1857. Oil on Canvas, 26x38 inches – John Hession photograph Private Collection

Female artists were path breakers. Not only were they some of the first women to sell art or publish poetry, but their work helped to introduce an interested public, especially the middle class, to the wonders of the White Mountains. These women had to step outside the norm to be noticed. They walked a very fine line between acclamation and denunciation.

Ann Sophia Towne Darrah was a pupil of Paul Weber. She was an artist whose long career included executing pastel portraits, landscapes, and marine views.

Hurd Fashion



Marjorie Hurd "Fashion on the Peaks: 1876-1935," *Appalachia* 20 (November 1935, (detail). Illustrated by Grace N. Aznive and Ethel M. McKenna – Courtesy of the Appalachian Mountain Club Library & Archives

It's impossible to talk about nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century women hiking and climbing in the White Mountains without discussing the clothing. Not only did long dresses impede progress, but cinched undergarments impeded breathing. Nor were the materials used suitable for outdoor recreation.

Emily Klug



Photo by Harold Orne. Emily Klug, circa 1930. Courtesy of the Mount Washington Observatory, Gladys Brooks Memorial Library

Emily Klug was a “picturesque tramp who became a White Mountain Legend.” She came to the United States from Germany early in her life. ” In the winter she was a nurse in a Brooklyn hospital. When summer came, she packed her camping equipment and left the city for the hills of New England.”

Emily Klug hiked alone. She spent three-four weeks each summer from 1912 until the mid 1930s in the White Mountains, carrying everything around her waist in a pinned-up skirt. She slept in the open and never complained of the weather. An AMC hutmaster wrote, “She carried her own sunshine with her.”

Mary Perkins Osgood Cutter (1869-1943)



Mary Perkins Osgood, Watercolor journals, 1895–1900. Courtesy of the Cutter Family

Mary Perkins Osgood (Cutter) was a summer resident of Randolph, and skilled botanist and artist who spent time studying and sketching wildflowers. Between 1895 and 1900, she produced five sketchbooks containing 244 watercolors of wildflowers.

“Most of the plates include information in Osgood’s hand on the date and location of the flower’s depiction, as well as the flower’s systematic name; she rarely indicated the flower’s common name.” (Al Hudson, Randolph Mountain Club)

Her work, which ended with her marriage and the births of her children, shows the many talents of the private artist/scientist.