

'Taking the Lead:' New exhibit at Museum of the White Mountains shows impact women have made

By Edith Tucker
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PLYMOUTH — Path-breaking women are the focus of a new exhibit, "Taking the Lead: Women and the White Mountains," at the Museum of the White Mountains at Plymouth State University.

According to Marcia Schmidt Blaine, history professor and interim museum director in a press release, the exhibit "focuses on gender and place over time, guiding visitors from the early 1800s through the 21st century."

"The White Mountains have given women the opportunity to discover their own strengths," reads a paragraph from the 64-page exhibit catalog. "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."

Many of these women lived in or made summer visits to towns north of the Notches.

Mary Perkins Osgood of Salem, Mass. (this reporter's grandmother), was a summer resident of Randolph even before she married mapmaker Louis F. Cutter, and spent time studying and sketching wildflowers. Between 1895 and 1900, Osgood filled five small sketchbooks with 244 watercolors, six pages of which were enlarged for display.

Her trunk, with her initials M.P.O., and two sketchbooks plus a photograph of her are also on exhibit.

An oil-on-board painting of the Dolloff Farm in Pinkham Notch, created in 1884 by Louisa A. Morse, also is on display.

Its label points out: "Wealthy Americans and, over time, the middle class had the means to vacation in the White Mountains. They sought relief from the crowding, noise, and filth of the cities and expected to find clean air, clean houses, and lots of farm-fresh food. To accommodate them, farming families turned their farmhouses into boarding houses or inns, run largely by women and children while the men continued to bring in farming income."

A watercolor by Emily Selinger is also on exhibit. Selinger (1848-1927), an accomplished artist, author, poet and musician, and her artist husband, Jean Paul Selinger (1850-1909), occupied a summer art studio from the mid-1880s until 1894 at the Glen House in Pinkham Notch.



Women hike Mount-Kearsarge at the turn of the 20th century. (COURTESY PHOTO)

They moved to the former art studio of Frank H. Shapleigh on the grounds of the Crawford House for the 1894 summer season, and a building that is now used as a hiker hostel at the Highland Center operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club. Emily Selinger was the only female artist-in-residence at any of the grand hotels in the White Mountains.

Audio recordings, as read by PSU theater students, allow visitors to hear words written by some of the historical women featured in the exhibit: Louisa May Alcott, who lived at South Conway's Atherton Farm, where she wrote "Eight Cousins"; Lucy Crawford, the first female historian of the White Mountains; renowned mountaineer Miriam O'Brien Underhill, who set the "rules" for winter hiking in the Whites when she moved to Randolph year-round with her husband, Robert; and Marian Pychowska and Isabella Stone, whose contributions and adventures were edited and published in 1995 as "Mountain Summers: Tales of Hiking and Exploration in the White Mountains from 1878 to 1886," by former Berlin city planner June Hammond Rowan and her husband, Peter.

Recorded interviews with contemporary women done by PSU history students are available at a kiosk as well as online, including Judy Hudson of Pelham, Mass., and Randolph, author of "Peaks & Paths, A Century of the Randolph Mountain Club" (2010); Rebecca Oreskes of Milan; Dr. Rebecca More of Providence, R.I., and Lancaster; Mary Sloat of Hanover and Lancaster; Laura Waterman of East Corinth, Vt.; Rep. Rebecca Brown of Sugar Hill; Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests President-forester Jane Difley of Concord; and Mariann Leberman of Meredith, U.S. Forest Service Recreation and Wilderness Program leader for the White Mountain National Forest, who previously was the only female snow ranger in Tuckerman and Huntington ravines.

Also interviewed include Alice Pearce, executive director of NH MADE, and formerly president of Ski NH for 21 years; Penny Pitou, a former United States Olympic alpine skier, the first U.S. skier to win a medal in the Olympic downhill event in 1960; and Barbara Wagner, who in 1983 became the first female Appalachian Mountain Club hut manager and went on to become a facilities manager at the AMC.

The exhibit also features a "maker space" offering visitors the chance to create their own images and a writing area where they can describe their recent experiences in the Whites.

Replicas of hiking costumes, showing the heavy, restrictive layers women wore in the 19th and early 20th centuries, also are featured, plus photographs of post-Civil War trampers loaned by Alan Lowe of Randolph, by the Mount Washington Observatory Museum and the AMC. Drawings by Grace Aznive and Ethel McKenna used to illustrate a November 1935 article in Appalachia — "Fashion on the Peaks" — also can be seen.

In addition, lesson plans are available for middle and high school social studies teachers that explore ways women challenged and worked within gender norms.

The exhibit will run through Oct. 7. Admission to the museum is free to the public.

New Hampshire Humanities, the Jocelyn F. Gutchess Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and Museum of the White Mountains membership donations supported the exhibit.

The museum also is offering a series of lectures. Two feature those with local ties:

- On Sept. 21 at 4 p.m., June Hammond Rowan will talk about "Mountain Summers" and what four fascinating women did from 1878-86 when they visited and explored the Whites, developing new trails, collecting plant specimens and discovering new place.
- On Sept. 28 at 6:30 p.m., sled dog owner Sally Manikian of Shelburne and historian and Chinook expert Bob Cottrell of Chocorua will discuss women and mushing in the past.

Museum hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; closed Sundays and university holidays.

For further information, visit www.plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains or call (603) 535-3210.

