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Exploring 'The People's Forest' at the Museum of the White Mountains

Ed Parsons Jun 15, 2018



Scrambling up the Caps ridge on Mount Jefferson. This is a hike offered this summer in collaboration with the Centennial Year of the White Mountain National Forest and the Museum of the White Mountains. (ED PARSONS PHOTO)

Last month, I went to see the new exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains in Plymouth entitled “The People’s Forest — A Centennial Celebration of the White Mountain National Forest.” It will be there through Sept. 12. It is a special exhibit for this centennial year of the forest that has been three years in the making.

I didn't feel pressed to write about the exhibit right off. A great cover story about it was done in The Conway Daily Sun by Tom Eastman the weekend of its opening. Yet, it is more of a summer event rather than just an exhibit. Many talks, presentations and outdoor activities for the centennial have been planned, and some have already happened. Many of the talks are at the museum.

I talked to the co-curators, museum director Cindy Robinson and longtime White Mountain expert David Govotski of Jefferson. They put the exhibit together in collaboration with many individuals, organizations and agencies. Some are the U.S. Forest Service, the Mount Washington Observatory, the Nature Conservancy, the Appalachian Mountain Club and Tin Mountain Conservation Center. There are also many installations and works by individuals. These are historical, scientific and artistic.



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Living in northern New Hampshire, we encounter the land on a daily basis. A good chunk of that land is the more than 800,000-acre White Mountain National Forest. Often, it is seen as the profile of mountains in the near distance as we drive through one of the communities tucked in valleys around it.

Plymouth is in the valley of the Pemigewasset River. It drains south from Franconia Notch and merges with the Winnepesaukee River to become the Merrimac River in Franklin.

In 1911, the Weeks Act set the stage for the purchase of lands in the east that effected stream flow. This included the peaks of the White Mountains, many of them denuded by logging, causing flooding and silt pollution downstream. On May 16, 1918, the White Mountain National Forest was established.

That the birthday of this hiking columnist is May 16 (not 1918 though) is incidental.

I drove into Plymouth on the bridge over the Pemigewasset River, swung around the roundabout and south onto Main Street, bore right before the town common, and up Highland Street about a quarter mile to the red brick Museum of the White Mountains on the right. I parked around back and strolled back to the front and up the steps. By now, it was a pretty familiar ritual, nodding to a student at the front desk and entering the main exhibit hall.

With a high ceiling, it is never claustrophobic there, even with an extensive exhibit. I always start on the immediate right wall, do a complete 360 of the room then wander randomly through the middle and wall exhibits.



Science and the arts intermingled there. Long ago, Plymouth University and the White Mountain Museum changed STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) to STEAM (adding arts). This encourages original thinking in both schools and industry.

Artwork, like the paintings of the University of New Hampshire art professor Brian Chu, were alongside a video of accurate maps created by AMC cartographer Larry Garland showing the growth of the White Mountain National Forest.

An intern digitized old lantern slides of early forest service photos of employees at work in the forest, and you can click through those yourself like an old slideshow.

A timeline of events in the history of the forest lines the entire exhibit on the lower wall below individual exhibits. The events and dates were supplied by Govatski and Robinson set it up. "It ties it all together," Govatski later said to me.

I especially enjoyed listening with earphones to the forest/river piano music of Ben Cosgrove, a young musician who was the White Mountain National Forest Artist in Residence in 2015.

Forest service employees had come to Plymouth to be filmed talking about their individual jobs. This was to attract students and all young people to consider a career in the forest service. One of note was wildlife biologist Jesse Dubuque of the Saco District.



Of interest to me was the well-done forest service video about the discontinuance of the Tunnel Brook Road after Tropical Storm Irene. It was unprecedented to intentionally decide to cancel a long access road and downsize it into a trail. The video effectively conveyed a collaboration between man and nature, and this “reverse development” of a road next to a wild brook seemed a thing of beauty, and a good example of clear thinking in the forest service.

There is an Orsborne Firefinder in a mock firetower cab. There are beautiful quotes about trail building by early Waterville trail builder Nathaniel Goodrich.

More is being added to the exhibit soon, including old photos of women “manning” the fire lookouts on Middle Sister and Pine Mountain during World War II.

I could go on and on. I better not. Instead, I better suggest a hike. One of the many activities offered this centennial summer is a hike up the Caps Ridge of Mount Jefferson led by Jeff Lougee of the Nature Conservancy. At 2.5 miles, this is the shortest hike to a northern presidential, yet requires some scrambling. Opportunities to learn about natural history abound long the way, from glacial potholes, to gray jays, to the Littleton Formation, to the ecology of the alpine zone and much more. For those who would feel comfortable attempting it the first time with a group and knowledgeable leader, this is perfect, and also for those who have done it before.

To learn more about talks, presentations, walk and hikes this summer that go with the exhibit and centennial, go to plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains/exhibitions/the-peoples-forest.

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