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GRAND VACATIONS AT GRAND HOTELS

Day Tripping

Grand Vacations at Grand Hotels

By Kathi Caldwell-Hopper

Everything about the hotels was grand and beautiful. You could escape for a week or a summer in the glorious White Mountains of northern New Hampshire when heat hit the city. You would wake each morning as the cool mountain air filled your hotel room, and your assigned maid would bring you a cup of tea or coffee and maybe buttered toast with homemade jam. Your day would begin with servants meeting your every need and it would be the same way throughout your day. From breakfast to dinner in the ornate dining room with wealthy friends and business associates, a vacation in the grand hotels of the White Mountains afforded a luxurious experience like no other in the 1800s and early 1900s.

I have always been fascinated by New Hampshire's grand hotels and even got to experience a bit of what those Victorian-era families of wealth once enjoyed on their lengthy summer vacations. Some years ago, a magazine story assignment meant a trip to The Balsams for the day to tour the facility and have lunch. I will never forget the day and the long drive from the Lakes Region that ended when I rounded the last curve in the mountain road and suddenly the sprawling and beautiful, red tiled roof hotel was before me. I rolled down my car window and was amazed that the smell of balsam from towering trees filled the air. It was like stepping into a fairy tale world and it just got better when I sat down to "lunch" in the dining room where the attentive staff was ready to meet the diner's every need. It was a buffet but there was enough gourmet food to feed a crowd and all of it was scrumptious. My visit offered just a glimpse at what wealthy vacationers who stayed at the grand hotels experienced each and every moment of their summer stay long ago.

When I recently learned one of my favorite places, the Museum of the White Mountains, is featuring an exhibit this summer called The Grand Hotels of the White Mountains, I had to make the drive to Plymouth to see what it was about.

The museum is located at 34 Highland Street in Plymouth and is part of Plymouth State University. Admission is free and the museum is open Monday through Friday from 10 am to 5 pm and Saturday from 11 am to 4 pm; it is closed on Sunday. It is well worth the drive a bit "up north" from the Lakes Region to visit this museum and specifically, to see such a great exhibit.

The day I visited was a weekday morning in late May, and the gallery already saw a number of people browsing the exhibit. There is something decidedly magical about the notion of wealthy people on vacation in the Grand Hotel era. It might be why so many people are drawn to stories of the Titanic's elite passengers. It is truly a "how the other half lives" story and sparks the imagination. The Titanic was a passenger ship and the grandest of its time, but the Grand Hotels of the White Mountains could certainly hold their own in the opulent category.

The exhibit starts with a display by the front desk area with old photos of the huge Pemigewasset House, once the towering statement piece of the town. Opened in 1841, the hotel burned in 1862 and was rebuilt in 1863 and ran until it again burned, this time in 1910. From 1912 to 1957 it served the public after being rebuilt, but closed when times changed. The photos show just how grand and sprawling the hotel once was as a place passengers stopped when the busy train service passed through Plymouth.

Large posters throughout the exhibit tell the viewer the history of the hotels, such as the Crawford House, which opened in 1850 and burned in 1859. It was rebuilt and reopened and in business for many years until it closed in 1975 and was destroyed by another fire in 1977. When it reopened for a second time (in about 1859), it was the largest hotel in the White Mountains at that time. At its busiest, it could accommodate 400 guests and covered over an acre of land. These days, the site of the former hotel is now home to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Highland Center.

To get a further glimpse at the luxury vacations that guests experienced, an old photo of the music room at the Kearsarge House in North Conway shows us a high ceilinged room with a polished wooden floor and comfortable chairs scattered around the space. The height of luxury at the time (1860s), the hotel was illuminated by gas lights.

The Balsams opened in 1874 in Dixville Notch and it is this hotel that particularly fascinates me. Because it was so far north and travel was slow, guests were assuredly committed to stay more than a few days. In its heyday it was run by Henry S. Hale, who transformed the former rather modest hotel into something grand that could accommodate 400 guests. Visitors were treated to daily meals made from the freshest produce and meats at leisurely sit-down affairs. (Surely a vacation in the White Mountains in those days couldn't be undertaken without expecting to gain a few pounds!) The Balsams, like most of the Grand Hotels in the area, experienced its ups and downs, such as financial hardships during World War II.

But running a huge hotel was very expensive and when times changed and wealthy vacationers could easily travel to Europe and other places, a Grand Hotel vacation wasn't the only choice. In 1954, the hotel faced bankruptcy and was auctioned. Purchased by Neil Tillotson, the property was transformed into a four-season resort. It operated for many years very successfully. In 2011 it was sold.

There is a lot of information on other hotels of the White Mountains as well, and it is all quite fascinating. But equally fascinating to me are the displays that tell the human nature side of day-to-day life in the hotels.

A "leisure in the library" display tells us that when you were a guest at a mountain hotel, you expected comforts and entertainment. Boredom was not allowed! Rich furnishings in lobbies, lounges, reading and writing rooms and music salons where guests met and mingled was a necessity. Such leisure-time displays as a mini library with books of the time period and an old bingo card from the Mountain View House show a few ways gentrified guests passed the summer hours when bad weather might keep them indoors: writing letters to those far away and playing cards and games with other guests.

There are also bits of information on some of the Grand Hotel managers and owners. One early hotel couple, William and Mary Jane Dodge, opened their home to weary stagecoach passengers on a rainy summer night in 1865. Those lucky guests enjoyed the hospitality and surroundings so much that they prevailed upon the couple to open their home the following summer. This inspired the Dodges to put an addition on their farmhouse and open it as an inn. The house/inn got larger over the years, and it must have been a great place to stay due to the welcome of William and Mary Jane. The inn grew and grew and today, it is The Mountain View Grand Resort & Spa, a popular place for guests to stay at any time of the year.

William and Mary Jane's black-and-white photos are on display in the exhibit and their story is a testament to the hardworking farmers and others who were clever enough to turn modest homes into inns. This in turn, opened the White Mountains to travelers and eventually, the Grand Hotels.

Beautiful paintings by talented artists show the grandeur of White Mountain landscapes. Such artists at Benjamin Champney, whose "Mt. Kearsarge from Diana's Bath" painting done in 1877, adorn the walls of the museum. For decades, popular artists spent summers painting and staying at hotels among the mountains and selling their artwork to wealthy hotel guests.

The less talked about side of White Mountain Grand Hotels is the story of the waiters and waitresses, bell hops, cooks, maids and others who worked at lodging establishments all over the area. While the wealthy vacationed in style, it was these workers who made all that possible.

I was fascinated by a lengthy typed list of do's and don'ts for staff at the Maplewood Club dining room. From rules on attire for waitstaff, such as the expectation that uniforms and aprons be spotless and well-pressed to the requirement that shoes have rubber heels, the dress code was strict. No painted fingernails and little makeup were allowed. No socializing was allowed and waitstaff could not talk among themselves while on duty. No leaning against walls, touching your own hair, no gossiping, and eating for staff was only allowed in the Help's Dining Room. The list went on and on for a number of pages and is a glimpse into just what staff did in those days to keep a job...and to always ensure the guests were happy.

A table set with china of the time period and a menu card on display bring the past with all its luxuries to life. The menu card lists such foods as Broiled Sardines on Toast, Potatoes Normande, Fillet Mignon, Corn Starch Pudding with Cream, Mocha Cake and Wine Jelly. Some of these foods would not find their way onto the table of any eatery today, but at the time they were accepted fare for wealthy people.

Another display tells of a less than pleasant part of life among the Grand Hotels long ago. We are told that Jewish guests were not welcome to stay at the Wentworth Hotel and Cottages. The owner had the tables turned on him when a wealthy Jewish man from New York - Nathan Amster - purchased the hotel. It seemed that Mr. Amster was turned away when he tried to check in to the hotel due to his Jewish heritage. He got the last laugh when he bought the hotel and changed the rule so that only Jewish people were welcome at the resort!

One of the more poignant displays at the museum is a large photo of a group of female employees taken around 1915. It is from an old employee photo album of The Balsams in Dixville Notch. We see six women dressed in dark uniforms with white aprons and collars. They lean against a stair rail, and one woman stares off to her right, while the others gaze directly at the camera. Perhaps they were catching a much-needed break in an employee's-only designated area and someone with a camera captured the moment.

The exhibit is a must-see for anyone fascinated with the White Mountain Grand Hotel era. You will learn a lot about the many hotels that once dotted the northern New Hampshire landscape and all aspects of vacationing in the area.

Everything about the Grand Hotels was indeed grand and ornate. Times have changed and we don't normally experience vacations in this manner any longer, but a visit to the Museum of the White Mountains will take you back, if only for an hour or so, to a time when luxury ruled.

An extensive list of lectures is scheduled for the summer focusing on the exhibit, such as the June 19 program titled "Grand Hotels as Summer Rituals" from 5:30 to 7 pm. For information on the programs, and the Museum of the White Mountains, visit <https://www.plymouth.edu/mwm/> or call 603-535-3210.