

A Pocket of the Mountains

By Nat Blauss

The mountains, in and of themselves, mean nothing. They are simply piles of rock. Before discovery they are thrust upwards and eroded away for millions of years, waiting for some story to be written upon them. Nothing more than a geologist's term, they are the subjects of the invisible and unimaginable forces of plate tectonics and the vicious assaults of wind and water. They are uncaring and uncared for. They are no more than rock piles, no more than silent trees waiting to fall in an uninhabited wood.

For us, as with anything else, undiscovered mountains are waiting for a human sort of arrival, a chance for time to leave its marks upon them. The landscape is a series of nameless valleys and ridges until a thought or presence has crossed into them. They wait for some memory to etch itself onto their surfaces by ice or chisel or by the indelible markings of the story that says, 'something happened here.' Like a yard newly covered in snow, there is a pristine quality to a mountain range's beauty, but it is only a pretty scene out the picture window. Until the moment that someone's thoughts have crossed into it, the landscape lacks love.

It is something that I am always forgetting, and in forgetting something dear slips away. Loving the mountains is a lip service I pay to places which have meant a great deal to me in the past, and which I hope will mean a great deal to me in the future, but simply looking at mountains, no matter how wonderfully the light plays across their skin, is simply not enough. Before a feeling enters, before there is some more intimate knowledge of the place, before it comes to develop a personality of its own, a mountain is only a passing pretty face.

Appearances are deceiving, but not in the normal sense. Often the appearance of the mountains is what we concentrate on, and so we are fooled. A mountain's appearance is cosmetic. To look at mountains is to say: 'from Pinkham Notch, Adams looks like a steep pyramid;' 'from any direction Cannon looks like a malformed lump of clay.' It is to describe the mountains by saying: 'Bondcliff has blue eyes.' It doesn't matter. It's no more than a list of observations, clinical and unfeeling. It is not why we hike, or how to build love. When I concentrate on these things rather than the belief that there is something more there to probe,

it makes me forget to care.

The mountains only begin to mean something when we start to see something more, blemishes and irregularities, not just on their surface, but on their character as well. We all climb mountains, or continue to climb mountains, to find their well-hidden secrets. Otherwise we would not keep coming back to the same places over and over again. We are looking for something, even if we don't know what it is. We look for a certain familiarity, a truer friendship through thick and thin.

A few weeks ago I climbed the Valley Way up to Star Lake with two friends. The col was still filled with ice and wind and snow. The wind, though out of the south, blew cold out of Madison Gulf and the cloud ceiling was, perhaps, a hundred feet over our heads. Looking down towards Pinkham and the Wildcats it felt as though we needed to crouch down so that we might look through a low window between the sill of the Parapet and the clouds above. Sometimes, as the clouds moved down on us, the window closed. Sometimes it opened again. In closing, however, it left the three of us very alone amidst stones covered in rime ice, and on a small alpine lake frozen straight through to bedrock.

Star Lake is an incredible place to be alone. It is hidden from the world. In winter the only evidence of humanity is a few lost signposts looking forlorn, and decaying cairns slowly being reclaimed by the Northern Presidentials' stone strewn ground. It is a secret pocket that can sometimes hold a few people.

To be there is an act of discovery. The col is trailless in three feet of ice and snow, but, for some reason, a hiker knows that there is something over the rise from the closed and shuttered hut. It is bushwhacking, but the krumholtz oblige and hunker down beneath the snow to allow for safe passage. The lake is discovered with its cracked and thrusting ice, its edges blur into the equally covered ground, and all that's left is to wonder who it is that left the strange cairns, what they saw when they first found the place. Between the slopes of Madison, Adams and the thrust of the Parapet, the whole area of Star Lake is a mystery of tiny proportions.

The hike reminded me why I love hiking, that it is something I can never give up even if at times I lose my way. I cannot put a name to my reason. It is, like Star Lake, a tiny mystery. All friendships, I think, are. The greater mystery is that we don't grow tired of a good

friendship. There is no resolution. For years and years we cultivate our relationships, slowly discovering a person or place's many moods, their reactions, the well-guarded secrets they hold close to their hearts. Over time what starts as a pencil's sketch, an outline, begins to fill in. In time color is added, smaller and smaller details. Perhaps if enough time and care is taken, if enough commitment is shown, a skilled painter can begin to see the mountains with a certain type of love, not just for their shape, but for their specific colors and moods. The hills acquire a certain personality. They begin to fill up.

Two years ago I hiked to Lonesome Lake in the snow, and then up to North Kinsman with a group of friends, one of whom was from New Zealand. We trudged up an ice and snow clogged Fishin' Jimmy Trail and then past Kinsman Pond, another mountain lake frozen straight through. Andrew had never seen the Whites before. Standing at the outlook, on an incredibly clear and warm March day, we looked across at Franconia Ridge. It stood there timeless, and slightly curmudgeonly. He said that he had seen much larger, and more rugged mountains. Still, these were something very special. These mountains, he said, felt incredibly old. It is what gives them an extra sort of density. I have not traveled so widely as him, but I couldn't agree more.

There is a certain awe to be overcome in our relationship because of the mountains' immense age. It is easy to tell which hikers have overcome it. I don't know what the specific amount of time that the familiarity requires to develop, but eventually people will begin to drop the title Mt., and just call peaks by their proper names; Washington, Lincoln, Bondcliff.

Hikers that get to that point have gone through a sort of boot-camp, we all have. First we are overwhelmed by sheer size and weight. As time goes on, details shrink the mass and scale of the mountains and they become more manageable. We come to understand their type of height and distance. Soon, we begin to see our small effects on them and change our habits to act accordingly. Finally, as an understanding is reached, we begin to explore them as the individuals they are.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon when I hiked out of Lakes of the Clouds just before dinner was to begin, and went off in search of the Old Crawford Path, which follows the height of land rather than descending, as the current trail does, to the lakes. I don't know when the path was relocated, though I assume from the difficulty of following it in a few places, it was some time

ago. The path wasn't, however, overly difficult to find. From the patch of dwarf cinquefoil at the base of Monroe all the way to the Davis Path above Tuckerman Ravine, I followed it, more or less, for three quarters of a mile along the crest of the broad ridge that descends from Washington to support the small masses of Monroe and Franklin.

The area is littered with the same rough stone that is found throughout the Presidentials, and between the rocks bigelow sedge covers the ground. Diapensia and alpine azalea, at this time of year flowerless and nearly indistinguishable, creep from between the stones or spread in the places where the hard pack of the old path precludes the sedge. It is beautiful country. Late on a clear afternoon the tired sunlight is the same color as the browning sedge, a certain type of honey, and the light sweeps across the meadows, let in through gaps in the low flying clouds. The wind moves the sedge in waves. Like at Star Lake, there is a loneliness that inhabits the place. Walking through it, one has the feeling of being high up in a watchtower, even the Lakes of the Clouds seem far below.

The path itself lives up to its appellation: path. Unlike trails cut now, which go over anything and everything in something resembling the shortest route, the Old Crawford Path follows the sensibilities of the horses that originally walked it. It meanders. It follows the grass, and pushes through gaps in the long strings of tumbled rock. The path has a certain *feel* to it. Often times, in spite of being grown over, the path is easy to follow just by looking at the landscape. The rocks and inclines suggest a route, and looking closely the smoothed and polished stones reveal that the path, long abandoned, led on in that direction.

At one point, not far along, the way winds up between two slabs of rock, slanting towards each other in a narrow, shallow chute. Moving up towards Washington, there is a large cairn and two iron pins where a plaque has been removed on the right, on the left two sets of initials carved into the rock. Just ahead on the left is a semi-circular windbreak built of rough, lichen-covered stones. This is where Father Bill Curtis' body, slightly protected by the chute, was found in August 1900. I assume the windbreak was built quietly, out of respect for the dead. I sometimes wonder if it has ever been used.

Father Bill died trying to hike Washington in a horrible, screaming storm of snow and ice along with his friend, Allan Ormsby. Two of the strongest hikers of the time, they faced into the cold and raging wind, and continued on. The mountains were careless, or else indifferent. Peaks have many moods, and the Presidentials are more notorious than most. It is unimaginable on a clear, cool fall day to imagine the Hell of flying snow and stinging ice shards

that greeted the two, even standing precisely where they stood.

After their deaths, a shelter was built farther along the Crawford Path. It has since been removed, though traces of it are still visible from the Camel Trail. The hut was built not long afterwards. This is all a part of their legacy. Another part is only a partial remembrance.

That remembrance is also contained by the path itself as it is consumed by the slow creeping diapensia, alpine azalea, and the indifferent encroachment of the bigelow sedge. Eventually all that will mark the passage will be a few oddly worn rocks covered in lichen. The collective memory of the place, formed partially by the scars in the rock and the compacted ground, is part of that legacy. And the legacy is part of it. The stones are marked not just by the chisels of two sets of initials, marked 1900 if I remember properly, but by the thoughts of all those who have been there. The mountains are forever changed. Even as I walked onwards, the chute disappeared back into their story, only to reappear when the next person arrives to wonder at the place.

I still wonder about the place now. I wonder how it has changed my view of the whole surrounding area. Certainly my view has changed since I first looked out of the dining room at Lakes of the Clouds at Washington, a monstrous creature, rearing up out of Ammonoosuc Ravine, head held high into a storm. First, I went to this place, then I began to become familiar with it. I learned something of its history, about the reason for its position. I went and found where the shelter had been, I found the small nameless chute out on the open shoulder of the ridge. The collective memory is the mystery for which I hike. I would like to become some tiny part of it.

I think, just by looking, I have.

Years ago my mother asked me, not being an outdoorsy person herself, why I liked hiking so much. I had several answers. I liked the majesty of the views, I liked the peace of the waters, I liked the smell of the balsam firs, I liked the physical challenge of the climbs. None of them though, even collectively, seemed sufficient. I ended up saying something about how incredible it was to stand on a place like Franconia Ridge in the brightest sunlight, and to be totally insignificant. There's something incredibly reassuring about being so incredibly small. I think now that being so small is the only thing that allows someone to fit into the pocket of Star

Lake, to see the hidden places that are littered throughout the forest.

Perhaps because we have no power in the mountains, they allow us to see their warts and moles. Also the things they hold dear. The mountains are the homes of the gods, and we remain mortals, playing in a landscape that does not rightfully belong to us. We try to maintain some sort of control: trails are fingers of civilization pushing into the forest as far as its resistance will allow. The sedges' reclamation of the Old Crawford Path is a testament to their ultimate endurance. The landscape retains the power to crush us with the slightest wayward thought, and so, each moment which we experience there in turn is dear to us, each one is stolen from something so strong that it bears parting with that tiny secret. The place knows, in a way, that we are still slowly adding to its secrets anyway.

Still, it is no place of half measures. A place where the challenges of the wind and the rain, the ice and snow, the bright sunlight of noon and the tired sunlight of the golden hours, are more difficult to carry with us than the packs on our backs. We must live them as we live them because they are not portable. The challenge that the mountains put to us is sometimes no more than to notice the tiny pocket between clouds and rock, trees and earth and sky that we have been allowed into. The challenge is to give a certain bit of love in return.

In the Northern Presidentials there is a small hollow, a rock from which a spring flows. Years ago, someone took a piece of chain, an attached tin cup, and pinned them there so that hikers could drink from the spring, or perhaps pour the water into bottles. The chain and cup are gone, I've found no evidence of them. I've thought about replacing them, but as of yet it does not feel appropriate. I have no idea how many people, over the course of a year, walk within ten feet of the place, stepping over the little trickle of its water without ever noticing the little hollow. Thousands, no doubt. Some have undoubtedly hiked past the place many, many times; others will only ever walk past once. Still the rock is there, barely off the trail, a mystery of tiny proportions to be found largely in forgotten stories or small explorations. Though the tin cup and the little chain are gone, their sentiment remains as a line of Psalm. In these wild places the sheer mass of the mysteries, the challenges and the fullness of a quiet love is incalculable, and the rock bears this testament in a carved line of verse. There in the rock, long ago, someone never to be named has carved *'my cup runneth over'*.