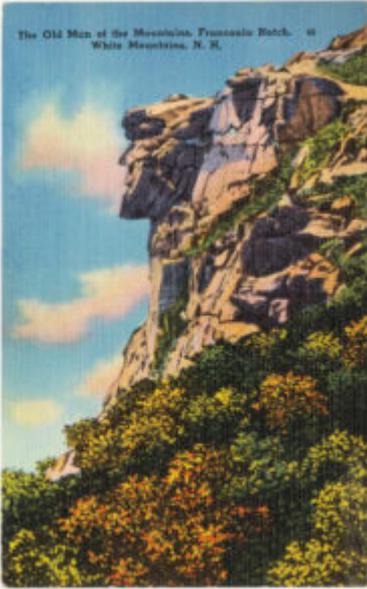


Tales From the End of the Bus Line: Bicycling Through the White Mountains

written by Megan and William Broughton | October 26, 2021



[Tales From the End of the Bus Line](#) is a long-distance collaboration between daughter/father Megan and Bill Broughton to collect the many adventures of Bill's young adulthood in Van Nuys, California. Installments are penned by the two of them. For a change of pace, this is a tale from the start of the bus line.

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Kevin Hanks was chosen to lead us out of the Valley of Industry. He was chosen because dad pointed out that in biking, like hiking, the slowest man should set the pace. At eleven years old Kevin was the youngest and the smallest; he may have weighed one hundred and ten pounds carrying a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, so he got the honors.

We'd met at the Scout House, which was my parents' second house. This was not what you would describe as their vacation place in the woods though, it was quite literally the house right next door to the house in Boscawen N.H. we were living in at the time. It had come up for sale and my mother and father thought it would be a good investment, plus it had been a rental for years and had been run down for a while, so it was inexpensive. They fixed it up themselves, (I learned how to paint walls, set window panes, lay linoleum and cut down lilac bushes there) and my siblings and I had the job of mowing its grass and shoveling its driveway. Mom used one of its front rooms for working in when she sent out the water bills for the town, one of her many part-time jobs. She also served as the town Librarian four days a week, at both the South Branch Library (one upstairs room located over the Much-I-Do volunteer fire department) and the Main Branch at the Boscawen Plains which was in a beautiful building on land donated by Frank Gerrish, who was somehow related to Dorothy Sanborn, because that land still belongs to her family, and

designed by Guy Lowell. Guy had designed the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1906, the Charles River Dam in 1910, the New York State Supreme Courthouse in 1912, and our library in 1913, which just goes to show that if you keep working at your vocation long enough you'll finally get to play in the big leagues.

My parents' second house was called the Scout House (and remarkably still bears that moniker fifty years and many owners later) because dad, who was the Scout Master of Boscawen Troop 384, let the Scouts hold their weekly meetings there and store all their equipment in the upstairs bedrooms, one patrol to each room. They used to meet at the Town Hall / Congregational Church building until a lady (no names here) complained that after every Boy Scout meeting something was missing or broken, so Dad moved the Troop to our second house. He was generous to kids that way, trying to give them the skills to survive in the wilderness and the world while showing them how to be useful adults who cared about society. I think it may have had something to do with him working since he was about eight or nine years old, but I think he enjoyed the camping out under the stars as much as we did. We would rendezvous there whenever we went camping, for a hike, for the Klondike Derby, or in this case, in the summer of 1970, for a little bike ride. Dad had caught the cycling craze in the late sixties, and had bought a ten-speed from Sears in Concord. He'd put the word out to his friends around town that any donated bikes could find a home with the Scouts, and in a few months our barn was filling up with old bikes. We learned how to fix brakes and true wheels, repack steering brackets, adjust and lube chains, and repair derailleurs. After a couple of ten and twenty mile day trips, we set our sights on the White Mountains and an eight day 170 mile camping trip by bike. There were ten of us if I remember correctly, and no guarantees on that at this stage of my life. Each bike was laden down with enough food to last us the entire trip, plus all of our tents, portable fold up sterno stoves, fuel, water canteens, sleeping bags, uniforms, ponchos, other camping gear, tire patch kits, extra tires and tools to make us as self-reliant as possible, although we did bring money to buy some of perishable food. There was no sag wagon - we carried everything on the bikes, and dad was the only adult. I wonder if this trip, with those ground rules, would even be possible in 2021.

The Valley of Industry used to be main route north through Boscawen, (the road had started life as The Kings Highway around 1700 and got renamed in honor of Daniel Webster Highway sometime in 1922) but it had been bypassed years before and was no longer a through way for cars. You could ride out that way on a bicycle though, and we did, heading north up New Hampshire State Route 3 to the city of Franklin where Dad had his accounting office. It was the smallest city in all of New Hampshire at the time, and for all I know it still is. We turned right on Central Street and crossed the bridge near the end of the Pemigawasset river, just northwest of where it joins the Winnepesaukee and becomes the Merrimack. We stopped at his office, where he hung a sign on the door that said in large type "On vacation for ten days, pedaling my B*** all over the White Mountains." down at the bottom of the sign, in small type, were the words "*That's BIKE, stupid." Then we continued up Route 127 and up the hill past Sanbornton to our first stop in New Hampton, a campground owned by a friend of dad's. I don't think the first

day was more than twenty-five miles, but it was the first time we had traveled with all that weight, and I'll admit it took a little getting used to. The campsite had cabins, so instead of setting up tents we slept in one of them, bunking down soon after dinner, which I made (we all took turns cooking breakfast and dinner, lunch was usually just sandwiches). Dinner that night was my infamous "Smothered Hamburgers." I got the recipe out of one of the issues of Boy's Life, the monthly Boy Scout magazine. It called for mixing a Lipton's Vegetable Soup mix using half the usual water, then frying the hamburgers in it. Everyone loved it, which shows you what pedaling a single speed gear-laden bicycle for twenty-five miles can do for your appetite. After dinner, we found out we weren't the sole inhabitants of the cabin when a pair of bats swooped down from the rafters in the middle of a ghost story. I think they were attracted by the lights. It took a half an hour to chase them out the door, and we never did finish the story.

The next day we were up early, breakfast being those little Quaker Oats packages, because we were trying to pack light. I remember rain that day, at least in the morning, and it was breakout-the-ponchos time until around noon. We did not see much traffic, either, which was fortunate, because we were probably strung out over half a mile. Dad was at the end of the column, and looking back I wonder now just how relaxing this all was for him. The second day took us just north of Lincoln, to "Clark's Trained Bears" trading post. I have no idea if this place is still there, but back in the day actual real live black bears would climb ladders and sit on little wooden platforms ten feet above the ground, and for a quarter you would buy bear food pellets from a little gumball machine looking thing. You put the "Bear Food", which looked like its maiden name may have been Purina Dog Chow, into a square tin that was attached to a rope pulley system between you and the bear. The bear then pulled the tin up to him and dumped it on the floor of its little tree fort and gobbled it up, Then he sent the tin back to you, with the implications of you not buying more food stated in a very loud roar. I bought him more food. We rode another mile or so afterwards to a campground, the name of which I've forgotten, pitched camp and had dinner.

The third day was special. We'd bought two pounds of bacon and two dozen eggs in Lincoln the night before, and fried the eggs in the bacon fat. These days I'm not even allowed to have bacon, back then I couldn't even spell cholesterol. Then it was back on the road and head-out-north once more, this time to the headwaters of the Pemigewasset at Profile Lake, (we had covered the length of the river from the finish to the start, if not the actual course) and the Old Man of the Mountain. Granted not everyone still uses coins, but if you ever receive a quarter in change, and it by chance is a New Hampshire State one, then you will see on the reverse side of it the Old Man of the Mountain. It was a series of five ledges high on Cannon Mountain that, when viewed from just the right spot, resembled the profile of a craggy face.

If you hold the quarter about arms length, what you see is not all that dissimilar from the actual view from the base of the mountain it rested on. The real thing was about forty feet high, and two dozen feet across, but it was a long ways away. The only way to see it close up was if you dropped a dime into a little binoculars machine so you could get a better view.

Dropping coins into them made me remember the bears, and wonder if Mr. Clark owned the viewing area as well. The Great Stone Face was the result of retreating glaciers that formed this part of the world some 12,000 -14,000 years ago. The indigenous folks of the region tell the story of how the Great Spirit honored a young man who stood atop the mountain tending a signal fire and awaiting his beloved to return home from her village, where she had gone to help fight a great sickness that had overcome her people. She never returned and on the night a messenger reached the young man's village to tell them of her death, there was a tremendous thunderstorm. In the morning, the signal fire was out and the young man waiting on the mountain was gone, but the image of The Great Stone Face was blasted into the rock, forever gazing outward waiting for her to return. We stayed looking at him for an hour, then rode down the five mile grade to Route 142, where we turned right and rode almost to the town of Bethlehem, to the little vacation house that Kevin's parents had. It was just over a wooden bridge, near a small stream, and some of the guys had lines in the water to fish for trout before we even unpacked to make camp. We caught a mess of trout and cooked dinner for Mr. and Mrs. Hanks in appreciation for them letting us camp in their backyard. It was a really nice place and we were camped right beside the stream, the sound of the running at night reminding me of the house in Boscawen. Even nicer was the fact that the Hanks' house had a shower! Three days on the road left us in need of one. We stayed two days at the Hanks, going on a little ride north and west to see that area. The next morning, Mrs. Hanks insisted on cooking us all pancakes before we left, they were delicious, and we gave her three "How-How's with a Yum-Yum" at top volume when we set out (if you don't know what those are, ask an old Boy Scout and be ready to cover your ears).

That was the furthest north of our trip, the south bound route I'll save for another installment.

(ed. note: All things change in this life. When Kevin and his folks came to pay their respects at my father's funeral in 1986, he had grown to six feet four inches and weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, mostly muscle. Still had a great big friendly grin on his face though. Also I am sure that many readers noticed all the references to the Old Man were in past tense. On the evening of May the 2nd, 2003, there was a fierce thunderstorm at Profile Lake, and the Great Stone Face was hidden in lightning and clouds. Sometime that night, probably between midnight and 2:00 a.m., the ledges finally succumbed to the elements and let go, tumbling down the side of the mountain they had clung to for so long. The Native people said the Great Spirit created him in a thunderstorm, and took him away in one, but he is at last reunited with his lover.)

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Dad wrote this story earlier this year at my cousin Katie's request (and Katie, I'm sorry to have made you wait this long). Much has happened this year for our family, and throughout it all I've thought of how I left this story languishing for months, unable to devote the time it deserves to my response. But in the meantime, I've lived an oddly fitting reply by going back to work after a pandemic furlough and once again leading camping trips that – while blessedly not eight days long – have carried with them their own

fair share of teenaged shenanigans, adult stress, gazing at mountains, and camping food that had no business tasting so good (including an obscene amount of Quaker Oats packages). In response to dad's ponderings on his own father's state of mind during the bicycling trip, I feel confident confirming that he probably felt a little maxed out most of the time but also intense gratitude and joy to be able to share that experience and those places with the young people in his life. No matter the worry and management flair-ups, the experience is always rewarding.

Bicycling has always been important to Dad, although he hasn't owned a bike in a long time. He taught me and my sister how to ride when we were kids (I believe he relayed her shouting "Great moments in momentum!" in an earlier story about her first ride down a hill without training wheels) which allowed us to become tiny hellions around our apartment complex alongside a group of other speed demons with worn tires, handlebar streamers, and colorful plastic beads threaded onto our wheel spokes. There were countless crashes, steering head-on into bushes, and at least one trip to the ER for a busted chin, but bikes were God and got us to school, to the neighbor's, and to the river channel a few miles away for weekend explorations.

Alongside bike-rearing, Dad made sure we knew New Hampshire lore (or his lore, at least). Without a doubt, the most important figure alongside Tobey the doofus neighborhood dog was The Old Man of the Mountain (and no disrespect to either). So when the thunderstorm rolled through in May 2003 and dad got the call from home, it was truly like a before and after moment in our young lives. Dad is by no means one of those "Men Don't Cry" men, but tears are usually a bit spare. He definitely cried some at that news though in a way that I think acknowledged a near extinct decades old homesickness and love for childhood as the terrain shifted into a new phase of life. I seem to recall hoarding New Hampshire quarters for a while, but that may be memory tinged with a narrative flair.