

Chapter Five

A PRESIDENTIAL BRAIN TRUST

THE CANADIAN GRAND TRUNK RAILROAD RAN PAST THE north end of the Presidential Range and on July 1, 1900, the company's engineers undertook an experiment to see if an electric light would be more effective than a kerosene lamp to illuminate the track ahead of their locomotives. That same day, more than seventy-five members of the Appalachian Mountain Club gathered at the hotel on the summit of Mount Washington for their thirty-fifth field meeting.

The principal impetus for the AMC came from the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That was in 1876, but the heart of the club was already deeply rooted in New England sensibilities.

Inside every Massachusetts Bay Puritan there was a Calvinist trying to get out, a person devoted to the sturdy conviction that the virtue of any undertaking is directly proportional to its difficulty. This tenet did the heavy lifting, it cut down the forests and pried the boulders out of the fields and built all those hundreds of miles of stone walls.

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, the calluses had gone west and a new salvation took hold on the roads between Cambridge and Concord. The

first generation of priests were the Transcendentalists; for them, landscape was a moral category, they spelled nature with a capital N and they believed that there were lessons to be learned in the wilderness that would make us better. Starr King found their gospel in the White Mountains: "Nature is hieroglyphic," he wrote. "Each prominent fact in it is like a type; it's final use is to set up one letter of the infinite alphabet, and help us, by its connections, to read some statement or statute applicable to the conscious world."

The members of the AMC were drawn by their own nature and by New England geography to the White Mountains and they got to work quickly. In 1877, Jonathan Davis laid out an AMC path from the town of Jackson, New Hampshire, north to Carter Notch. Beginning in 1879, the AMC maintained the Crystal Cascades Trail from the Pinkham Notch road up toward Tuckerman Ravine. The club built the Hermit Lake shelter at the entrance to the ravine in the early 1880s, they built the Imp Shelter on the mountain range across Pinkham Notch from Mount Washington in 1885, and the first high-altitude hut at Madison Springs on the Presidential Range in 1888.

At intervals the club would hold a field meeting in some suitably rusticated upland site where they would discuss club business, listen to papers read by their peers, and stride vigorously into the landscape. These meetings were not easy, as witnessed by an address by AMC president Charles Fay. He took his text from *Mind*, a quarterly review of psychology and philosophy, and the article he chose was titled "The Aesthetic Evolution of Man." "We must never forget," he began, "that the taste for scenery on a large scale is confined to comparatively few races and comparatively few persons among them. Thus the Chinese, according to Captain Gill, in spite of their high artistic skill, 'the beauties of nature have no charm, and in the most lovely scenery the houses are so placed that no enjoyment can be derived from it.' The Hindus, 'though devoted to art, care but little, if at all, for landscape or natural beauty.' The Russians 'run through Europe with their carriage windows shut.' Even the Americans in many cases seem to care little for wild or beautiful scenery. They are more attracted by smiling landscape gardening, and, it seems to us, flat or dull civilization. I have heard an American just arrived in Europe go into unfeigned ecstasies over the fields and hedges in the flattest parts of the Midlands." This opening is extended through twelve pages of rumination. That is to say, the field meetings of the AMC had elevation, and they also had loft.

By the closing years of the nineteenth century, the really important values in the academic community of Boston had to be faced. The Harvard-Yale game loomed on the fall horizon of 1897, a situation that called for the best the temples of fortitude could muster, so Harvard planned to send its team up to the Presidential Range for a pre-season hike. *The Harvard Crimson* student newspaper did not fail to note the gravity of the situation and its proper response: "We know little of football, but we have great faith in White Mountain air and exercise to make hardy and resolute men."

William Curtis was the referee for thirteen Harvard-Yale games, he was himself a celebrated athlete and the very image of a hardy and resolute man, but in July of 1900, he and his friend Allan Ormsbee lost their game in the White Mountain air.

WILLIAM CURTIS AND ALLAN ORMSBEE

JULY 1900

The thirty-fifth field meeting of the Appalachian Mountain Club was announced for the summit of Mount Washington and more than seventy-five members gathered there on Saturday, June 30, 1900. By this time, the summit had achieved a very considerable degree of civilization. There was the Summit House hotel, a large observation tower, the old Tip-Top House hotel, the editorial and printing office of *Among the Clouds*, the office of the carriage road, the observatory of the U.S. Army Signal Service, the engine house of the railway, a garage for the carriage road, and two stables.

Reverend Harry Nichols did not favor such latter-day novelties. He and his sixteen-year-old son Donaldson planned to approach the summit by way of an overnight hike up the Davis Path on Montalban Ridge. William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee were of a similar mind, they'd make the meeting the last stop on a lengthy tour of the White Mountains.

William Curtis lived in New York and he was noted for his physical prowess. He was affectionately called "Father Bill" in recognition of his leading role in the establishment of the Amateur Athletic Club and the Fresh Air Club in New York, he was an admired writer for *The Spirit of the Times*, and he was nothing short of a sporting prodigy. In 1868 he set the record for harness lift at 3,230 pounds, and he set records in the 60- and 100-yard dashes, the hammer,

shot put, and tug-of-war. He set rowing records in single, double, and four-man sculls, and he won in the 100-yard hurdles, 200-yard and quarter-mile runs, the mile walk, the high jump, swimming, skating, and gymnastics. He was sixty-three years old in 1900 and described as a splendid figure of a man, deep-chested and vigorous, a man who did not wear an overcoat even in the harshest winter weather. He often led hikes and his circulars of notification were apt to include notes such as, "This outing will not be cancelled or postponed due to inclement weather." His friend Allan Ormsbee was thirty years old and he too was from New York, a trained athlete and a man of notable physical prowess.

The two friends had come north a week before the AMC meeting and climbed Mounts Lafayette, Whiteface, Passaconaway, and Sandwich Dome with another friend, Fred Ilgen. The three of them spent Friday night at the Pleasant View Cottage in Twin Mountain, the first town north of Crawford Notch, and they separated on Saturday morning. Mr. Ilgen wanted to climb Twin Mountain, then he'd take the train to Fabyans and go to the summit on the cog railway. Messrs. Curtis and Ormsbee had a slightly odd day in view: they'd take the train to the head of Crawford Notch and climb Mount Willard, then come down and climb the Crawford Path up the Southern Peaks to the meeting on the summit.

Reverend Nichols took the longest and most difficult approach to the meeting. In the large topographical view, the Presidential Range is more than Mount Washington joining the Northern and Southern Peaks; the lower but longer Montalban Ridge lies just east of the Southern Peaks, and the long and largely untracked Rocky Branch Ridge is still farther to the east. The Davis Bridle Path up the Montalban Ridge bumped along in the woods for an interminable twelve miles before it broke into the open on the shoulder of Mount Washington and this dreary prospect found no favor among the stylish gentry who did their mountain climbing on horseback. Mr. Davis lost his shirt, his trail was abandoned in 1854, and when Reverend Nichols started up to join the 1900 field meeting, no less an authority than Professor Frederick Tuckerman had long since declared that the Davis Path was "in a state of innocuous desuetude."

Reverend Nichols was not deterred. He'd made the same trip six years earlier and this time he added several miles by bushwhacking up Razor Brook from the town of Bartlett, at the south end of Crawford Notch. The rever-



William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee approached the AMC meeting on the summit by way of the 8.2-mile Crawford Path. They encountered a fierce storm and took shelter by burrowing into this clump of dwarf spruce.

end and his son were accompanied by Walter Parker and Charles Allen, two experienced woodsmen from Bartlett hired to serve as guides, packers, and aides-de-camp. It did turn out to be tough going, but it was a fine summer day and the four of them reached Mount Isolation, about two-thirds of the way along their route. They built a lean-to shelter here, had a good supper, and lay down to sleep on beds of fresh balsam boughs.

A sharp thunderstorm broke over them in the middle of the night and a strong north wind pushed it on past them, then Saturday dawned with dark skies and heavy gusts of drizzle blowing through the woods. The next four miles were a struggle through the undergrowth of the abandoned trail and seemingly endless blowdowns; later Reverend Nichols wrote, "By eleven o'clock, after a final hour of toilsome crawling under, over, and through gnarled and unyielding and water-soaked scrub, we stepped out, presumably on Boott Spur, into the full fury of the storm." The fog was so dense they could hardly see each other at shouting distance, the mist soon turned to sleet, and the ferocious wind knocked them down again and again.

At about that time, a driver was approaching the Cow Pasture on the carriage road, a place two miles straight across the Alpine Garden from the

crest on Boott Spur that the Nichols party had reached. This was Nathan Larabee and he'd started his four-horse mountain wagon up from the Glen in bright sunshine, then he hit rain at the Halfway House and at 6-Mile he came to ice and such a strong north wind that he had to pile heavy rocks in the windward side of his wagon to keep it from tipping over.

Reverend Nichols was familiar with the terrain and the hazards of the weather, and he realized that the wisest course was to get down to the valley by the shortest route available. But, as he wrote later, "Who would have done so on such an expedition—what climber, what explorer? You say, "Keep straight up—on and up steadily, resolutely, bucking the wind."

So the Nichols party plunged on across the long and completely exposed crest of Boott Spur. There were places where the trail was almost lost in the ice and the abyss of Tuckerman Ravine was at their elbows, but they kept on and up, steadily, resolutely. Soon they could make their way only in short rushing bursts, crouching behind rocks when a gust hit, then rushing again, sometimes falling flat if no large rock was nearby to shelter them. "It seemed," said Mr. Allen, "as if the hail would take the hide off."

In normal weather, this part of the trail is a pleasant stroll, the terrain is virtually flat and the footing is no more difficult than a garden walk. The Nichols party required two hours to make a mile of this walk against the fierce barrier of storm. As agreed, their guides left them where the Davis Path joined the Crawford Path and those two men found their own way down the Southern Peaks with the camping gear. Reverend Nichols and Donaldson pushed on toward the summit cone. The reverend tied blankets around his son's head and around his own, partly for warmth, partly as helmets to ward off the rocks when they fell, and so they kept on, the blankets blowing wildly in the gale.

The reverend's diary recounted the harrowing trip: "Suddenly I stumbled on a cairn, a stoneman one and one-half feet high, with another just beyond in sight even through that driven rime; they were cairns built the day before by the Lowes for the Appalachian Meet. I knew at once that we were safe. We had only to follow those cairns to the summit. I bade my son crouch behind me, await a lull in the wind at each cairn, then make a rush on hands and knees for the next—making least resistance, yielding full subservience, to the storm's blast. And so we made port, reaching the summit about two-thirty P.M."



1. William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee climbed Mount Willard in the morning
2. Took shelter in stunted spruce
3. Curtis died on Bigelow Lawn
4. Ormsbee died just below summit
5. Reverend Nichols and party came up Davis Path and spent their first night near Mount Isolation, a trip made longer by bushwhacking up Razor Brook from Bartlett

Among the Clouds reported, "The thermometer had fallen from 48 on Friday evening to 25 on Saturday morning, and so rapid had been the formation of the ice, and so fierce the velocity of the wind, that even small particles, driven like from a gun, broke dozens of panes of glass on the Summit House." Inside, bellboys hastened to each new break and replaced the broken glass with wooden panels while the Appalachians had lunch and began their scheduled events with the reading of papers and following discussion. Reverend Nichols and Donaldson joined them and, as the minister wrote later, "Along toward supper-time the chairman remarked, 'It surely is time for our two friends to come in.' 'What friends?' said I. The chairman replied, 'Two of our party, Mr. Curtis and Mr. Ormsbee, who kept around by the Crawford House to walk up the trail.'"

At this time, William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee were some four miles away down the Southern Peaks, pressing on toward the AMC meeting. Father Bill was familiar with the area and when he was on top of Mount Willard he could have looked up the range and seen the heavy cloud cover on Mount Washington. He could also have stopped in at the Crawford House earlier in the day and inquired about conditions on Mount Washington; the Crawford House was connected to the summit by telephone and they were in the habit of warning hikers of threatening conditions. Instead, Father Bill and his friend descended from Willard, crossed the road to the beginning of the Crawford Path without talking to anyone inside the lodgings, and started right up toward the summit of Mount Washington more than eight miles away.

They reached timberline on Clinton and turned south, against their line of travel, to sign the weatherproof register the AMC kept at the top of that mountain. Turning north again, they reached Pleasant Dome and, rather than take the level bypass trail that avoided the climb up the dome, they took the higher trail. Two workmen were cutting overgrown brush on the bypass at about 1:30 P.M. and, since there was already a high wind and blowing sleet, they tried to overtake the two hikers and warn them not to go on. Failing that, they called after them but could not get a response.

By 3:00, the trail workers decided that the storm was rising past endurance, so they packed up their tools. The Bartlett guides appeared just then and reported that they'd passed two hikers, headed uphill and into the storm. Guide Charles Allen said that he'd greeted the younger hiker but got only a

grunt in reply. Mr. Allen told him that it was very bad up ahead, so bad that they'd had *difficulty getting down and out of it themselves and it was unlikely that anyone could climb upward against such a storm.* This caution drew no response, and the two parties continued on their opposite courses.

In the interval between passing the workmen and passing the guides, Father Bill and Mr. Ormsbee had climbed Pleasant Dome and again left their names in the AMC weatherproof register. They added, "Rain clouds and wind sixty miles—Cold."

By this time, most of the AMC members had reached the summit by way of the cog railway. As they neared the summit they admired the delicate tracery of rime ice collecting on every surface and they were inconvenienced by the wind as they hurried from the cog trains across the platform into the hotel, but this was, after all, Mount Washington—vigorous conditions were the reason they'd chosen the summit for their meeting. They settled themselves, had dinner, and then gathered to hear the schedule for the coming week. The AMC had written a full menu of activities and this introductory evening began with remarks by John Ritchie. He was one of the two secretaries of the club and he took as his theme, "Simple Rules Which Will Insure Safety to all on Any Mountain Walk."

"A high mountain range," he began, "introduces into a country certain elements of uncertainty so far as the weather is concerned." He went on to urge the members to make a good hiking plan and keep to it, to stay close together, to wear strong clothing, to avoid high-spirited shouting which might be interpreted as a distress call, to avoid the temptation to roll rocks down steep slopes, and to avoid touching the streamside plant known as hellebore. As Mr. Ritchie spoke, the most dangerous summer storm in living memory was still gaining strength on the other side of the walls.

The Appalachians were expecting Messrs. Curtis and Ormsbee. Fred Ilgen came up on the cog train that afternoon and he put word around that his two companions would be along presently, but when they did not appear a telephone call was made to the Crawford House. The people there said they had not seen anyone meeting that description and as far as they knew no hikers had started up the Crawford Path that day.

The Appalachian Mountain Club had gathered a notable group on the summit. J. Rayner Edmands was there, the greatest trailbuilder in the history of the Presidential Range, the man who built the Gulfside Trail, the

Randolph Path, the Link, the Israel Ridge Path, and the Edmands Path, to name but a few. Louis Fayerweather Cutter was there, the man who drew the definitive White Mountain maps for fifty years. Vyron and Thaddeus Lowe were there, the renowned trailbuilders and guides from Randolph, as strong, as experienced, and as reliable mountain men as any in the region. It was little short of a Presidential brain trust, and now the chairman of the AMC program took counsel with the Lowes and they were uneasy; there were summit loops and bypasses on two of the Southern Peaks, and if Father Bill and Allan Ormsbee were living up to their reputation for vigor and determination, they might well have taken a summit loop while the two Bartlett guides were on the more prudent bypass.

Accordingly, the two Lowes lit their lanterns and started out the door to see what they could find on the Crawford Path. They'd barely stepped onto the platform when their lanterns blew out. More ominously, the platform was heavy with ice and it wasn't the light and crumbly rime that often comes with an off-season storm, it was clear solid ice. The Lowes had all they could do to get back to the door of the hotel.

Inside, however, fears were being allayed. Reverend Nichols told of the severe weather his group met and how their two guides had turned back at the Davis Path junction and gone down the Crawford Path. Surely they'd meet Father Bill and Allan Ormsbee and tell them not to go any farther up the ridge, to come down to the valley with them. Surely Messrs. Curtis and Ormsbee were safely down in some valley lodgings by this time in the evening, and they'd join the Appalachians' field meeting as soon as the weather cleared.

Father Bill and Allan Ormsbee were not safely lodged in the valley. They passed the Bartlett guides and the trail workers between two and three o'clock, then they pushed on up the rising and entirely exposed trail over the crests of Franklin and Monroe. This section of the Crawford Path is about a mile long and the terrain is very similar to the ridge of Boott Spur, where Reverend Nichols and Donaldson were taking two hours to cover the same distance that storm-lashed afternoon. Those two were able to reach the safety of the summit hotel before Saturday nightfall. Father Bill Curtis and Allan Ormsbee were not.

Sunday was impossible for any outdoor purposes on the AMC schedule, but there was inside work to do, there were papers to read and proposals to be

heard. One proposal asked if the Appalachian Mountain Club would accept the gift of a house and land on Three-Mile Island in Lake Winnepesaukee and, if so, would it also buy the rest of the land on the island for a club reservation? Both proposals were approved.

Outside, the wind remained at gale force and the temperatures dropped into the 20-degree range, but, curiously, the precipitation did not turn to sleet or snow, it was rain and it froze on every surface as solid ice. Frank Burt, publisher of *Among the Clouds*, wrote, "At the end of the turntable lever, whose dimensions are three by four inches, there projected on Sunday morning a solid block of ice in the teeth of the wind a foot and a half in length."

The storm blew itself out on Monday morning, the summer sun warmed the ice-clad summit buildings, and soon whole walls of ice were falling to the ground. Several parties of Appalachians set out to make up the planned hikes they'd lost to the storm on Sunday while others remaining on the summit looked out for the arrival of Father Bill and Allan Ormsbee.

Mapmaker Louis F. Cutter started down the Crawford Path to meet the missing hikers or, failing that, to see if he could find any trace of them. He reached the bottom of the cone and started toward the twin peaks of Monroe about three-quarters of a mile away across Bigelow Lawn. This is a remnant of the ancient upland peneplane; the summit cones of the peaks rise above it, the ravines cut into its sides, and the ice sheet scrubbed its surface to leave a gently rolling place of ledge, tundra-like grass, and broken rock. Mr. Cutter stayed on the Crawford Path until the trail up Monroe was only 300 yards ahead and the Lakes of the Clouds were just to the west; then he came to a place where the path ran between two sections of ledge. The floor of this slot was barely wide enough for the path and there, face down with his head resting on a rock, lay Father Bill Curtis. He was wearing strong hiking boots, a medium-weight woolen coat, a shirt made of shoddy, and long pants; a light cap was near his head.

Mr. Cutter determined that he was dead, then he went looking for Allan Ormsbee. A few hundred paces south on the Crawford Path, not far beyond the beginning of the trail up to the summit ridge of Monroe, he found a camera and a milk bottle lying in the Crawford Path. Just downslope on the left, there was a patch of dense scrub that seemed to have been modified in a curious fashion; it seemed like a sort of shelter, but a quick glance revealed no trace of Allan Ormsbee. Mr. Cutter continued down the Crawford Path

almost as far as Pleasant Dome, where he met a group of upward-bound hikers. They said they hadn't seen anyone else on the trail, so he turned back toward Mount Washington. At the junction of the Davis Path he met three Appalachians who were starting for Boott Spur; these were Messrs. Coffin, Parker, and Weed. Mr. Cutter told them of his discoveries and went on up to the summit where he alerted several more Appalachians. Two members of that cadre started down the Tuckerman Ravine Trail to intercept a group of clubmen returning from a hike to the edge of the celebrated chasm and they were added to the work force.

While these excursions were afoot, the Coffin, Parker, Weed group went on toward Monroe to make a more thorough study of the shelter in the scrub patch that had caught Louis Cutter's eye. These patches are impenetrably dense on top, but there is often some space among the lower stems and it looked as if someone had cut away several pieces of the tangled mass and used them to close up an opening on the exposed north side and at the same time make more room inside. Crawling into the opening, they found three slices of bread wrapped in waxed paper with one of them partly eaten, and, in the deepest and most protected corner of the shelter, they found another camera. Mr. Parker knew Allan Ormsbee and he recognized the camera in the path as belonging to him. It seemed reasonable to assume that the camera inside the shelter belonged to Father Bill. This precipitated a close search of the area in hopes of finding Mr. Ormsbee, but there were no further traces.

Now the three men returned to thought. They reasoned that Allan Ormsbee was less than half the age of Father Bill and, since both were heading for the summit and seemed determined to get there through Saturday's storm, the younger man would probably have gone farther. And, since Father Bill was found lying right in the Crawford Path, it seemed likely that they were trying to stay on the trail come what may. They would be crossing the same terrain that the Nichols group had needed two hours to negotiate a little earlier on the same day and, calculating the daylight available, the searchers decided that if Allan Ormsbee survived a reasonable length of time, he would have made his way some considerable distance up the cone of Mount Washington. Offsetting this calculation, they realized that the moss inside the shelter was noticeably worn down. How long had the men stayed there? Had they both stayed the same length of time, or had the younger and presumably stronger Allan Ormsbee gone ahead for help? Had Father Bill rested



Until it was stolen by vandals, a brass plaque marked William Curtis's final resting place.

in the shelter and started out again Saturday afternoon, or had he stayed in the shelter and then started up on Sunday when his companion did not return? Had one or the other of the men left the camera and the milk bottle in the path to serve as a signal?

Bearing these imponderables in mind, Messrs. Coffin, Porter, and Weed divided their three-man force; one stayed on the Crawford Path while the other two moved out on either side, Mr. Weed on the right, Mr. Coffin in the center, and Mr. Parker on the left. Thus arrayed, they went along the Crawford Path to the Davis Path junction and then followed the Davis Path out toward Boott Spur for a distance before deciding that such a divergence was unlikely. Returning to the Crawford Path, they paused again to think.

Mr. Parker was the only one among the Appalachians who knew Allan Ormsbee personally. He made the point that his friend was a strong and resourceful man who favored a direct approach to problems. Given this nature, Mr. Parker suggested that he might have left the wandering Crawford Path and taken a direct line to the summit, which would have the added advantage of moving him somewhat toward the lee side of the cone. Accordingly, the three men altered their course and made straight for the summit while keeping their spread pattern for greater efficiency.

Their progress was slow and difficult because their new route was almost entirely over the large, angular, and unstable rocks that make up most of the cone, and this day they were further slowed by the ice remaining from the storm. Pausing to rest, they decided that if they were having so much trouble, Allan Ormsbee must have had a great deal more. Taking this into account, they changed their route to the staggering zig-zag pattern they thought a man *in extremis* would have taken. Mr. Weed, farthest to the right, passed the pile of stones marking the place where Harry Hunter gave up the ghost twenty-six years earlier. Mr. Parker was farthest to the left and at 4:30 in the afternoon he found the body of his friend Allan Ormsbee. He was about fifteen paces west of the Crawford path and within sight of the back wall of the signal station on the summit.

Mr. Parker could see some ladies of the Appalachian group near the signal station and he called to them, they passed the word to the AMC men, and a group quickly formed to carry Mr. Ormsbee's body the little way remaining to the mountain-top settlement. The other body lay a mile and a half distant, so a stretcher was improvised and a group set out at 6:00 P.M., then when more Appalachians returned to the summit from their days' excursions they went down the Crawford Path as reinforcements. This made twenty carriers in all, and even with this considerable strength the remains of William Curtis did not reach the summit until the middle of the evening. Colonel O. G. Barron, keeper of the Fabyan House, made the necessary arrangements in the valley; he called on two undertakers in Littleton, brought them to the base station of the cog in his carriage, and ordered two caskets to be sent up by a special train. Another special train brought the bodies down that evening and Fred Ilgen accompanied them to New York the next day.

That was the end of the sad affair for Father Bill Curtis and Allan Ormsbee, but not for the Appalachian Mountain Club. Given the strength of their numbers on the scene, the concern any deaths on the Presidential Range would cause, and the many prominent members of the club who were present, the accident that opened their field meeting had several consequences.

The cause of the deaths was the first matter to be settled. Dr. George Gove of Whitefield was the medical examiner and he made the rulings. Mr. Curtis was discovered with his head resting on a stone and Dr. Gove found a large bruise at that point on his forehead. The depth of the bruise indicated that



This cross marked the spot where Allan Ormsbee perished.

Mr. Curtis was rendered unconscious by the blow, the position of his head on the rock proved that he did not regain consciousness, and the maturity of the bruise showed that he did not die for several hours after he fell.

Allan Ormsbee's body was covered with bruises and lacerations that testified to the battering he sustained as he tried to reach the summit. If a strong hiker such as Reverend Nichols could not stay on his feet in daylight, much earlier in the storm, and with far less ice to contend with, it was obvious that Allan Ormsbee's night must have been terrible indeed, and that he gave everything he had to give in his effort to find help for his friend before he himself died at the place of his last fall.

This episode involved many prominent people in the Boston community and, needless to say, the press was not slow to react. As so often happens at times like this, the more distant the reporter, the more lurid the report. Thus

the Wednesday edition of *The Boston Globe* included the news that during the course of his ordeal Allan Ormsbee broke his leg and tore loose the branch of a tree to make a splint. Dr. Gove did not agree.

More substantial studies were undertaken by the Appalachian Mountain Club. During the week of the field meeting they agreed that Mr. Ormsbee would not have left Mr. Curtis unless the older man could not go on. Following on this, three theories emerged. One was that the two men reached Mount Monroe and improvised the shelter in the scrub, Mr. Curtis remained there while Mr. Ormsbee went for help after leaving his camera and the milk bottle as a sign, then Mr. Curtis revived himself and pushed on alone. The second theory was that both men rested in the shelter and then went on together, but became separated and were not able to find each other in the storm. The third theory was that they rested in the shelter and went on together until Mr. Curtis fell, then Mr. Ormsbee went on alone.

As reported in *Among the Clouds*, "Those who advocated the first theory are divided as to whether Curtis followed Ormsbee on Saturday night or on Sunday morning. Against the Saturday night theory it is argued that he would be more likely to stay overnight in comparative shelter than to set out in darkness, which must have come on soon after Ormsbee left. Against the Sunday theory it is argued that he possibly could not have lived through the night, and if he had, why was the bread left uneaten? As to the theory of their both leaving the shelter together, it is asked why did they leave their cameras behind?" The editor of the paper further wondered about the milk bottle: If the men understood the seriousness of their situation, why didn't they leave a note in the bottle?

By Thursday, another theory had emerged. T. O. Fuller was a member of the Appalachian gathering and he had gone down to the cleft ledge where Father Bill died. The exact situation was well known by this time, and as Mr. Fuller was studying the place he found a deep hole among the rocks. He saw something down there that caught the light and, reaching in, he pulled out a pair of gold-rimmed bifocal spectacles.

Mr. Fuller and two others studied the rock upon which Mr. Curtis was reported to have hit his head and they decided that this rock and two others had been placed there recently. Father Bill, they decided, had not fallen and hit his head, he fell and then those three rocks were put there so he could rest his head. Furthermore, Mr. Fuller's group thought, the ground where he lay

had been newly formed into a slight hollow. His spectacles, presumably, fell off as he rested there and they dropped down into the hole.

All this suggested that the two men rested together in the scrub shelter and then went on together to try for the summit. There was a large rock in the trail near the spot where Father Bill was found, and Mr. Fuller's theory was that he had tripped on this rock and fallen. Then, this theory held, the two men decided that in light of Father Bill's weakened condition he should stay in the shelter provided by the trough of ledge while Allan Ormsbee went for help. The younger man improved the hollow and made the rough rock pillow to ease Father Bill's suffering, then set out for the summit.

Before the field meeting was over, a committee was appointed to study the deaths and write a report to settle the matter: Albion Perry, John Ritchie Jr, and J. Rayner Edmands. They reviewed and considered the experience of Reverend Nichols and Donaldson, their two guides, the trail workers, and Messrs. Ormsbee and Curtis, and they reconstructed the distance and timing of those four parties, and the progression of the storm.

The study committee decided that the bread, the cameras, and the milk bottle were moot points, they were silent witnesses and nothing important could be learned from them. The committee deputized Mr. C. F. Mathewson to study the place where Mr. Curtis was found and he concluded that the body fell where it was found and the weight was too great for Allan Ormsbee to move it very far, if any distance at all. The study group also concluded that Mr. Curtis had not fallen at some other place, then gotten up and walked to the place where he was found. They discounted the report that Mr. Curtis had experienced some slight heart problem a few years earlier and had now suffered a major attack. Dr. Gove certified that death did not occur for some time after the fall and the accumulation of blood in the bruise indicated that Mr. Curtis' circulation was not impaired. The committee approved Professor Parker's written report that Mr. Curtis fell from exhaustion and that the position of the head did not lead to any helpful conclusion.

The committee considered the layout of the Crawford Path, noting that the air-line distance from the fatal site to the summit was about a mile, but the wandering route of the bridle path covered a mile and a half. Since Mr. Ormsbee had never been to the area before, it was not likely that he was able to follow the path. Rather, he had gone straight for the summit and had fallen repeatedly in the chaos of broken rock.

Here they cited Reverend Nichols' written report: "The wind increased in force. It blew us over on the sharp rocks. It blew the breath out of our bodies. Our progress was by a series of dashes—a few rods, then a rest, then a dash again for shelter. The rest must be but for a moment, lest the fatal chilliness come on. I could feel it creeping over me, I could see it in my boy's chattering teeth. The fog had become sleet, cutting like a knife, it gathered on the rocks, every step meant danger of a slip, a fall, a jagged cut. Whether the wind, or the sleet, or the ice under foot, were the greatest element of danger is hard to say. I lost my hat, though it was tied down; my alert boy found it, he shouted its safety to me from three feet away, but I heard nothing save the howling wind." The committee pointed out that the ordeal of the Nichols party probably fell short of the conditions Mr. Ormsbee faced, that the effect of higher wind and the onset of darkness could be judged by at least fifty severe bruises and lacerations on his body.

The makeshift shelter was puzzling. The men were probably in good shape when they came over the low crest of Franklin; they were in good physical condition when they started and, although there had been warnings, the severe conditions were still up ahead. So why had they taken the time to make the shelter and, once made, why had they left it before conditions moderated? Was it made because one of them was already exhausted or injured, or was it abandoned because one of them was in need of attention, or because the conditions were already so difficult at the shelter that they decided they might as well push on? Was Mr. Curtis already in such bad condition that they couldn't descend to the greater safety of the woods so Mr. Curtis could rest while his companion went down to the valley for help?

If the shelter was not vitally needed, there must have been some vitally important reason for the two men to separate farther on. The committee decided that if for some reason the two men could not go back, they both should have gone down to the woods rather than one or both going on toward the summit. They urged any readers of the report to remember this point, but at the same time they recognized that most people would try to keep going onward toward their original destination and, in this case, the safety and comforts of the summit hotel.

The committee again cited Reverend Nichols' writing on this point: "Coming out from the scrub into the wind, just one step back means safety; that is surely the step to take, though the way down by ravines and brook beds

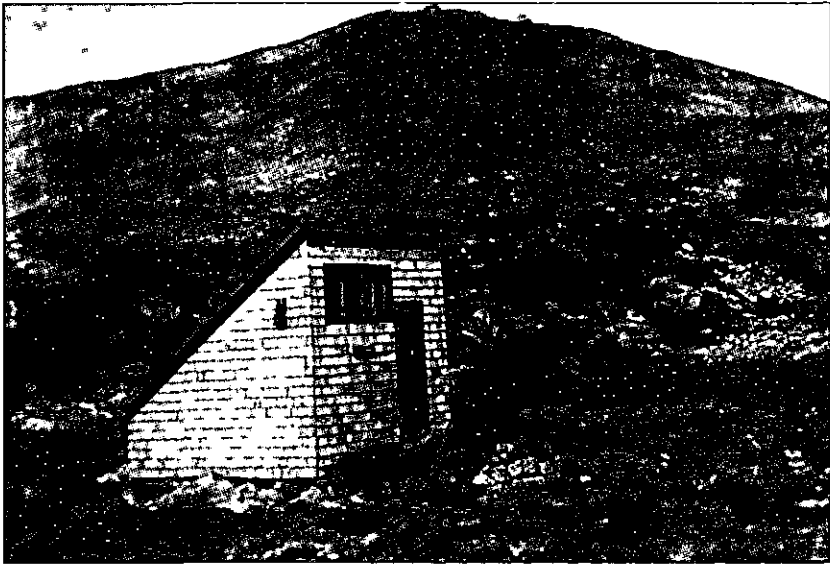
be long and tedious. All pushing on makes return less possible and develops new elements of danger. The only safety on finding such a wind above tree level is to turn back at once. There is always protection under the trees and a chance to work one's way out, however toilsome." On this point, however, the reverend did not follow his own advice.

The committee continued to ask questions. Did Mr. Curtis push on alone after he was left at the shelter? Did Mr. Ormsbee go on alone after being with the older man when he fell? Did he know that his companion had fallen? These and many other conjectures occupied the select committee for eleven published pages, but they had no further evidence beyond the injuries and the artifacts and they reached no conclusion.

At the end, they returned to the manuscript of Reverend Nichols: "The one essential is to retain hope. To have missed the line of cairns across the Lawn, to have got out of the trail, to have left the old corral of the Bridle Path just on one side, or not to have known that it was but a short distance from the Summit House—for one moment not to have known where we were, would have meant discouragement, despair, exhaustion, death."

THE CURTIS-ORMSBEE ACCIDENT PRECIPITATED WELL-ORGANIZED searches and engaged several elements of the valley population, it was intimately studied and widely debated, and it was the object of a scholarly report. As such, it can stand as the beginning of the modern age of misadventure on the Presidential Range.

More concretely, it resulted in immediate planning for a refuge shelter on Bigelow Lawn, the saddle connecting Monroe and Mount Washington. This was in service by the next year, 1901, a minimalist structure accommodating six or eight hikers in distinctly minimal comfort. (The AMC guidebook warned, "It is far too uncomfortable to attract campers.") It seemed obvious that a similar provision on the Northern Peaks would make sense, and in 1901 Guy Shorey and Burge Bickford spent two nights at Madison Spring Hut while scouting for a refuge location along the Gulfside Trail. That shelter would not be built until 1958, in Edmands Col, but both of the men would go on to wider and more immediate fame, Guy as one of the greatest of all White Mountain photographers and an indefatigable North Country promoter, Burge as the most famous of the guides working from Gorham.



The deaths of William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee led the AMC to create the first hiker's shelter on the upper slopes of Mount Washington in time for the 1902 summer season. It was purposely made too oddly-shaped and uncomfortable to appeal to anyone not in dire straits.

The presence of the Bigelow Lawn refuge shelter provided a strong impetus to the construction of the nearby Lakes of the Clouds Hut in 1915 and, by extension, the rest of the AMC hut system.

The landmarks of this episode can still be found 100 years later. The Camel Trail starts at the three-way junction with the Crawford Path and Tuckerman Crossover, just a few minutes' walk above the Lakes of the Clouds Hut. Near the height-of-land on the Camel Trail, two iron bolts rise from the ledge a few paces south of the trail, and the stubs of two more bolts are broken off level with the rock. These bolts anchored the refuge hut. The old Crawford Bridle Path can be found here, too; its visible relics are a narrow but distinct depression in the ground, thin grass cover or none at all, and rocks that have been moved to make easier footing for the horses.

Unlike most modern trails, this trace does not run straight at all, it turns and meanders as a horse would prefer to go. Heading south, the Lakes of the Clouds and the hut can be seen on the right and before long the old bridle path passes between two slabs of ledge rising opposite one another to make

a narrow trough. This is the place where William Curtis died, and the hole where the gold-rimmed glasses were found is still there. The bridle path meandered on toward Monroe, and numerous traces of the old location can be seen as the Crawford Path climbs the summit cone of Mount Washington; they're easily recognized by the hollow made by the horses' hooves among the rocks and grasses and by the large shifting of rocks to make the horses' way easier. The place where Allan Ormsbee died is on the Crawford Path just below the summit and twenty yards off the trail to the west, marked by a plain wooden cross.

It is probable that the clump of scrub spruce that so vexed the AMC study group still exists. This scrub is found all along the range at timberline; in fact, it is the timberline. The spruce trees of the valley diminish in stature as they gain in altitude until they form very dense clumps that may be only a foot or so high, full-grown trees that never grew up, nature's own bonsai.

Nature's metabolism in the subarctic conditions at timberline is very slow, and it's likely that the scrub patches have not changed very much since William Curtis and Allan Ormsbee passed by. The scrub cave they fashioned was on the eastern side of Monroe and described as close to the Crawford Path in a place with a short downward slope.

The scrub on the eastern side of Monroe shows two patterns. Heading north from Franklin, as they did, a hiker first finds a wide and unbroken mass of scrub that is continuous from above the trail all the way down to the full-grown trees on the floor of Oakes Gulf. This does not meet the "scrub patch" definition from 1900 and it is unlikely that it ever did.

That continuous mass of scrub ends about halfway along the flank of Monroe. From this point on, the surface is either the grasses typical of Bigelow Lawn or scattered patches of scrub. There is only one patch that's on a short slope below the trail, and this is also the largest in both area and height. It is L-shaped and there's enough room for several adults to crawl in among the stems under the greenery; in fact, the presence of old tin can fragments shows that others have had the same idea. There is one thin place in this patch of scrub, it's at the inside angle of the L and it faces north; this matches the Curtis-Ormsbee effort to cut branches and put them in the north-facing opening of their shelter. This patch is 400 paces south of the place where the body of Father Bill Curtis was found lying in the old bridle path.