

Chapter Ten

WRONG-HEADED FROM THE BEGINNING

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE SOURCE OF MISFORTUNE LAY outside of ourselves; it might be the result of a curse, or a poison philtre, or a misalignment of the stars, which is the origin of the word disaster, but it was not of our own doing. My father did not believe in such fancies; he always said that people got into trouble because they didn't use their heads.

Father was certainly right when it came to Simon Joseph and his two friends in 1933. Their plans for a Mount Washington climb were wrong-headed from the beginning, a textbook of accumulating errors; the inevitable misfortune created a great stir among New England climbers, and its many consequences still mark the Presidential Range. All this, however, came too late for Simon Joseph.

SIMON JOSEPH
JUNE 1933

On Friday, June 17, 1933, Simon Joseph, Gerald Golden, and Charles Robbins took the train from Boston north to the station at the top of Crawford

Notch. They were all college age; Simon was nineteen and a sophomore at Harvard. They planned to sleep in the woods near the Crawford House that night, get food at the hotel, and then hike across the Southern Peaks to the Lakes of the Clouds Hut.

The site of the Crawford House had deep memories of hikers; the patronymic Crawfords built the first trail to the summit of Mount Washington in 1819 and it began here, and Frederick Strickland started his 1849 climb from the family's inn here. In 1933, the most recent edition of the hotel loomed like a great white ocean liner anchored at the top of the notch and it had become a rather starchy place that sheltered five presidents, assorted captains of industry, and P. T. Barnum.

The three boys from Boston were intent on saving money and they were not provided with starchy clothing. History is silent on this point, but it seems likely that they hoped to get something to eat in the help's dining room next to the kitchen. The hoteliers thought otherwise and told the boys that they could find food at the store maintained by the proprietor of the Willey House, at the site of the disaster celebrated by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Ambitious Guest*. This was a three-mile walk down the steep Crawford Notch road and then back again, and the trio decided they didn't want to make the effort. They each had two blankets, so they curled up to sleep in the woods, though it wasn't a very comfortable night: the temperature was down near 40° and there were fairly heavy splatterings of rain. The next morning they again tried for some food at the hotel and they were again turned away. Thus prepared, they started the hike of 6.8 miles along the Southern Peaks to the Lakes of the Clouds.

The Crawford Path is one of the most delightful outings in the White Mountains and the terrain is easy. The Northern Peaks were sharply cut by the glaciers and they're jagged pyramids above the main ridge. The ice sheet slid over the first five of the Southern Peaks, so they have rounded summits joined by moderate depressions in the ridge; only Monroe has a jagged outline. The Crawford Path was graded for horse travel. It rises by easy grades to Clinton, then turns north along the ridge to Pleasant Dome, which may be avoided by following a bypass. Franklin has so small a rise that it hardly seems like a separate summit at all, and there's another bypass around the sharper summit of Monroe.



Simon Joseph.

The Southern Peaks are generally lower than the Northern Peaks and the Crawford Path flirts with timberline for almost its whole length as it climbs toward Mount Washington. The easy grades and long views, the quick access to the shelter of dense spruce, and the connecting trails back to the valley, all make it an excellent climb for a day of dubious weather.

Sunday, June 18, was a day of dubious weather. Simon Joseph and his two friends left warm early-summer days in Boston and they did not anticipate the climatic difference their northerly trip would create. This morning the temperature at the Crawford House was still in the 40s, wind-driven rain was falling when they started up the trail, and they had not brought anything beyond the clothes they'd need for a summer evening.

The trio had no food with them and they knew the Lakes of the Clouds Hut was not yet open for the season, but they thought there would probably be some other hikers staying in the off-season refuge room at the hut who would probably have some extra food they'd pass around to new arrivals. If that didn't work out, Joseph and his friends planned to break into the closed part of the hut; surely there would be some nonperishable food left from the previous summer.

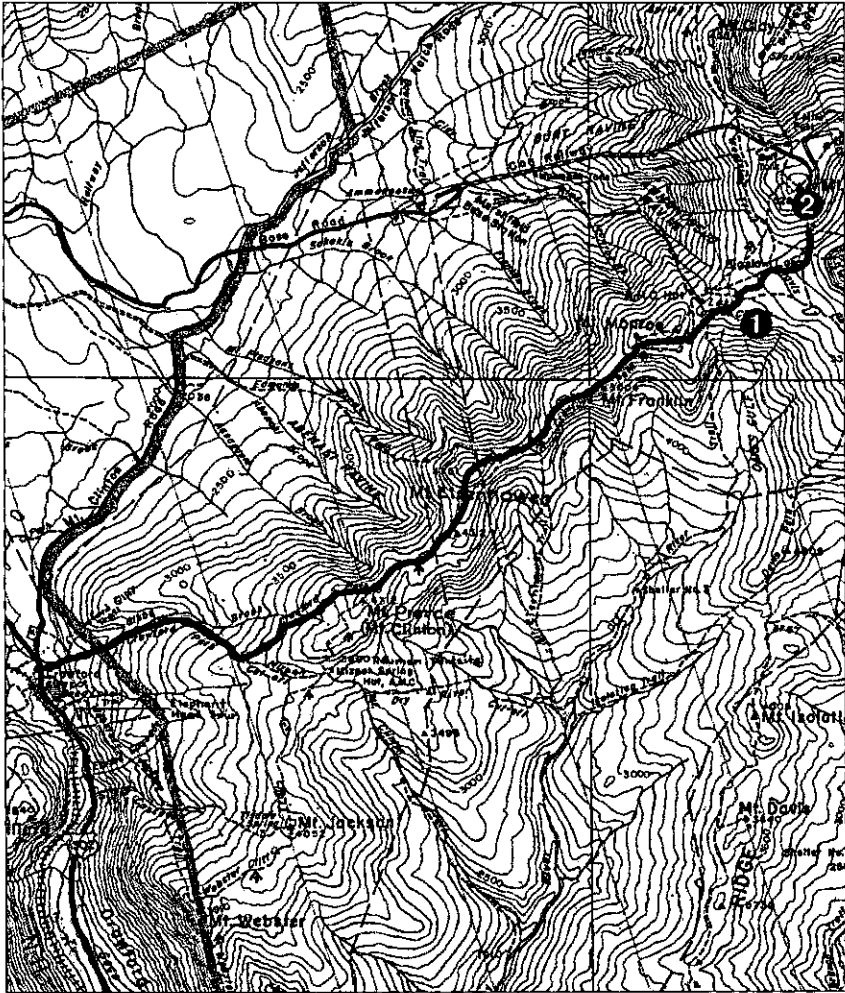
The hikers were in the clouds long before they reached timberline on Mount Clinton. Charles Robbins was getting along better than the other

two, so at some point after they reached the crest of the ridge he hurried on toward the Lakes of the Clouds Hut. The conditions up ahead would not improve: the 8:00 A.M. readings at the Mount Washington Observatory showed a temperature of 33° with a northwest wind gusting to 75 mph and carrying sleet and snow.

There was indeed a party of hikers in the refuge room at the hut. Five youngsters from Massachusetts had come in Saturday night and stayed on through Sunday, pinned down by the weather. Several other hikers came in during the morning and ten more came by at about noon, heading down the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail and the quick shelter they'd find there, but first they left a note in the logbook saying that conditions up on the summit cone were very unpleasant. Their retreat was wise and time-honored; the original name for the Ammonoosuc Ravine was Escape Ravine.

The next entry in the logbook shows that Charles Robbins came in at about three in the afternoon, very much reduced by the weather and by the lack of any food since early in the previous day in Boston. The group waiting out the storm in the Lakes refuge room spent twenty minutes getting him warmed up, then John Ellsworth and Don Plympton started out to find Simon Joseph and Gerald Golden. They headed south along the Crawford Path and found Gerald on the bare, rocky terrain between Monroe and Franklin, about a mile from the hut. He seemed lethargic, but he was on his feet and moving in the right direction and they asked him where the other fellow was, meaning Simon. Gerald said that his friend was ahead of him on the trail, so the two rescuers turned in that direction, back toward the hut.

The Lakes of the Clouds Hut did not exist when the Crawford Path was laid out, so the bridle path followed the height-of-land along the rounded ridge that leads from Mount Monroe to the beginning of the summit cone of Mount Washington. The lakes are west of the height-of-land and about 150 feet lower, so when the hut was built in 1915 the Crawford Path was redirected toward the lakes. The new trail turned sharply west on the flats at the northeast edge of Monroe and the original location was abandoned. The old path was still visible, though; rocks were rearranged to make a better footway, conspicuous depressions were worn into the terrain in many places, and grass and moss had not yet covered the wear of eighty years. The two rescuers were hurrying to find Simon and in their haste they missed the abrupt turn and



1. Simon Joseph missed turn to Lakes of the Clouds Hut
2. Died just short of Southside Trail

continued straight on along the old path. John Ellsworth quickly realized the mistake and they went back to the junction and down to the hut, where they reported that they'd found Gerald Golden, but not Simon Joseph. So ended Sunday.

Monday brought somewhat more tolerable weather and a group from the refuge room finished their trip and went down by way of the AMC headquarters in Pinkham Notch, which did not yet have a telephone. They reported that a fellow seemed to be missing up near the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, but they were not good on the details. Meanwhile, Gerald Golden and Charles Robbins had recovered some strength and they joined two of the stay-overs and went looking for Simon. The hut was scheduled to open for the summer season that day, and at about 4:30 in the afternoon AMC hutmen Ellis Jump and Don McNaughton arrived and started putting things in order. Soon Gerald and Charles returned with the two other searchers and no news of their missing friend, so they went up to the summit and found Alex McKenzie at the weather observatory and told him that their companion was unreported for a whole day.

Alex was a member of the crew that established the observatory the previous October and he'd been there through the winter. Now he was a bit skeptical. He remembered several times when winter hikers came in with dire reports of lost companions and each alarm proved to be unfounded. Nevertheless, he took two steps. The observatory crew had improved the time during their long winter isolation by building a twenty-pound two-way radio and they sent this breakthrough unit down to the hut to see if it would help with the search. Alex also opened the radio link to the Forest Service office in the town of Twin Mountain, twelve miles west of the summit, and the district ranger said he'd organize a search party and come up to the hut the next day, which was Tuesday.

Tuesday was election day in Twin Mountain and the district ranger could find only one person who wanted to climb the Southern Peaks on the chance that someone was missing. The two of them searched the middle section of the trail the boys had taken and found nothing. They returned to their office in Twin Mountain that evening and called the district supervisor in Laconia, who authorized funds for a ten-man search party. While this was going on, the two hiking partners of Simon Joseph also went down to the valley and hitched rides another eighteen miles to the Willey House in Crawford Notch,

where they made a telephone call to Simon's parents. Their son had now been missing for two days and this was the first time they'd heard about it. Mr. Joseph immediately called the governor of Massachusetts, who organized a search party and dispatched it to the northern mountains.

On Wednesday, these two groups converged on the Lakes of the Clouds with a total of nineteen men. One group was led by District Ranger Spinney of the Forest Service and New Hampshire State Fire Chief Boomer. They took the Edmands Path up the west flank of the ridge to join the Crawford Path between Pleasant Dome and Franklin, then turned north and searched the middle section of the Crawford Path. The other group was led by District Ranger Van Alstine; they climbed the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail to the Lakes of the Clouds Hut and searched southward toward the other group. No one found any trace of Simon Joseph.

On Thursday, Assistant State Forester Hale reached the hut with a third search party, but the morning brought thickening weather and the searchers stayed inside the hut. The air cleared later in the day and all three groups renewed their work. At the same time an airplane made repeated low passes along the length of the Southern Peaks and over the slopes at the head of Oakes Gulf, which runs the length of the ridge on the east side. Mr. Spinney and Mr. Boomer led their groups back to the areas they'd been searching on Wednesday, while Mr. Hale's group went out along the Camel Trail leading from the hut eastward across the head of Oakes Gulf.

At 4:00 Thursday afternoon, Mr. Hale's group found the body of Simon Joseph near the old Crawford Path. He had indeed been ahead of Gerald Golden and he'd gotten to the place where the new section of the Crawford Path turned left toward the hut, the place where John Ellsworth and Don Plympton had briefly followed the old path, then corrected their mistake.

Simon Joseph followed the old path, too, and he did not correct his mistake. The bridle path ran fairly straight along the crest of the Southern Peaks, in fact, today's trail is hardly changed at all from the first location. The old path continued straight at the junction by Monroe and ran about twenty yards across a pebbly flat, then it wandered and curled across the broad saddle for more than half a mile until it reached the Davis Path. This route makes no sense except for horses; the Crawford family liked to keep their animals on the soft tundra-like soil as much as possible, and they stayed away from ledge and areas of loose or rough rock.



Simon Joseph ran out of strength here. If he'd turned to the left he would have seen the AMC's Lakes of the Clouds Hut, but the wind was blowing from that direction and exhausted hikers rarely turn into the wind.

That old location had been officially abandoned after the new trail was built to the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, but the old footway made by the horses was still much more obvious than the new route. Simon must have been well aware of his surroundings at this point because he kept on the crooked path, stepping on the very place where Father Bill Curtis died thirty-three years earlier, but he finally ran out of strength forty paces short of the anchor bolts remaining from the refuge built after the Curtis-Ormsbee episode. At this point the strong northwest wind would have been hitting Simon on the left side of his face, so he turned away from the icy blast and made his way twenty paces across a grassy patch to an outcropping of rocks on the lee side of the ridge. There's a high-walled split in the rocks here; it's floored with grass, a soft and well-sheltered spot, and Simon lay down to rest on this bed.

After two days of uninterrupted bad judgment, Simon had finally done something right in finding this shelter. But those who believe in star-crossed enterprise would note that if Simon had looked left instead of right as he stood on the Crawford Path he would have seen the Lakes of the Clouds Hut only a few easy minutes away. Moreover, if he'd kept going for a few moments longer he would have found the Camel Path just beyond the iron



Simon Joseph lay down to rest on this patch of grass, where he died without unrolling the blankets he was carrying. Mount Washington is in the background.

bolts and a sign there directing him to the hut a quarter of a mile away. Simon did not get up from his rest, though, and he died on that grassy bed with his blankets still rolled up.

NEWS OF THE COMPLEX SITUATION SURROUNDING SIMON JOSEPH'S death spread quickly, and the results were both immediate and long lasting.

The first concerned radio. As the nineteenth century turned, virtually nothing of what we think of as modern times had emerged. One of the first hints of the world we now take for granted was the amazing device put

together by a young Italian named Guglielmo Marconi, who successfully transmitted a wireless telegraph signal for about a mile in 1896, what would become known as radio. But Marconi was not a disinterested scientist; he was more like an electronic entrepreneur and he had his eye out for the main chance. This came in the fall of 1899, when that year's edition of the America's Cup yacht races were scheduled for the ocean off Sandy Hook, at the northeast corner of New Jersey. James Gordon Bennett was the editor of *The New York Herald* and he thought it would be a splendid thing if up-to-the-minute news of the races could be flashed from the off-shore excitement to his downtown editorial offices. So he sent the proposition and an offer of \$5,000 to Signor Marconi, who came to America to cash in both the check and the publicity and create the world's first ship-to-shore radio contact.

It was an important moment. From the wine-dark seas of Homeric legend until that day, ships at sea had always been alone. Ocean communications were limited to line of sight with flags or lanterns; beyond that they were at the mercy of the many gods of the sky and the deeps. Now they could send messages over the horizon, but, perhaps following Marconi's commercial impulse, ship-to-shore telegraph was seen as a novelty, a way to send birthday greetings and other such trifles, and operators were licensed by the Marconi Company as if the Italian meant to keep radio as a proprietary account.

One licensee was Jack Irwin, at the Marconi station at Siasconset on the eastern shore of Nantucket. Another was Jack Binns, the Marconi operator on the White Star liner *Republic*. On the night of January 23, 1909, the *Republic* collided with the *Florida*, inbound from Italy, and received a mortal wound. Marconi operators did know of a distress call, but it had never been used; it was CQD, standing for "Seek You—Danger." Now Jack Binns sent that code and Jack Irwin picked it up, and for the rest of the day the rescue of the *Republic's* crew and its 1,500 passengers was directed by radio. This proved the true usefulness of Marconi's novelty, but CQD was an awkward series in Morse code, it was (— · · — · · ·). So it was changed to the simpler (· · · — — — · · ·), which was SOS, a letter-clump standing for no words but easier to transmit under stress.

The rescue of the *Republic's* passengers created an enormous sensation and Jack Binns was the unwilling hero of autograph seekers, tabloids, popular songs, and a fictionalized film by Vitagraph. Jack fled home to England and grateful White Star executives offered him the most prestigious Marconi job

they had, but at the last moment he fell in love and asked for a later posting. This cost Jack Binns his chance to sail with the *Titanic*.

In the coming years Guglielmo Marconi continued to devote more time to his reputation than to his laboratory, and the effect was to freeze the official dogmas of radio at the rather primitive stage represented by his low-frequency transmissions. It wasn't that higher frequencies were not known or the necessary equipment was too difficult to make, the problem was that the sainted Marconi had not gone in that direction.

This led to a curious situation in which eager youngsters building high-frequency radio sets at their kitchen tables were often considerably ahead of the industry. They formed a loose sort of juvenile federation which they named the Radio Club of America, or RCA, and Joe Dodge was in that loop, reassuring his aunt that he didn't have to open the window to let in the radio waves.

Alex McKenzie was another of those inventive youngsters, and he and Joe stayed with it. By the early 1930s, they were leading spirits in establishing the weather observatory on the summit of Mount Washington, a place with something very much like the old isolation of the silent ships at sea. The observers rarely came down the mountain, Joe Dodge and the AMC camp in Pinkham Notch was their nearest contact with the outside world, and there was only fitful highway traffic and no telephone in Pinkham.

Joe had been one of the first few Americans to contact Europe with short-wave radio; he'd been working a short-wave set in Pinkham Notch since his summer-only tenure before 1926, and when the summit observatory opened he had a line-of-sight link to the summit. Now the plan called for the observatory to make radio contact with the Blue Hill Observatory four times a day and transmit weather data on the same schedule.

Radio traffic from Marconi sets traveled in relatively long waves and, given the practice of the day, the antennas were correspondingly long. Ocean-going ships in the days of the *Republic* and the *Titanic* usually transmitted on the 100-meter band with antennas that stretched most of the length of the ship. This was still the model in 1933, and it presented an immediate and obvious problem for operations on the summit of Mount Washington: the antenna wire would be too long to mount inside the observatory building and an outdoor antenna would be destroyed by the very reason for its existence, the violent summit weather.

The observatory crew decided to try a higher frequency and they put the shorter antenna in a stout wooden box bolted to the summer water tank on the highest point of the summit settlement. Accepted Marconi practice indicated that the higher frequencies could be used only in line-of-sight transmission and Blue Hill was over the horizon, but Joe and Alex were right: the Blue Hill transmissions were successful and a page was turned in the theory and practice of radio. Closer to home, Joe Dodge maintained daily radio contact with the summit station from opening in the fall of 1932 until war-time restrictions were imposed in 1942, then he resumed the contacts until the hour he left Pinkham Notch in 1959.

Many years later, Alex McKenzie thought back to those times. He realized that the scatter effect and bending capacity of the troposphere had been greatly under-estimated in 1933, and the success of the summit transmissions forced an important reconsideration in this area. Furthermore, the position of the antenna box on the tank was fortuitous; they'd faced it toward Blue Hill, which seemed obvious, but they didn't realize that the steel hoops and curved back wall of the water tank might work as reflectors and reinforce the signal. Furthermore, their Blue Hill schedule gave them a self-contained index to the effect of weather on the propagation of radio waves. In further contradiction of prevailing electronic wisdom, the summit crew discovered that their signal could reach New York City on certain days. This was much farther down the curve of the earth than Blue Hill and, putting this together with their weather maps, they realized that high-frequency signals were reinforced by traveling along a weather front and were also boosted by traveling through bands of certain temperatures, a method whales use to send their sonic messages across thousands of miles of ocean water.

The more immediate result of the Simon Joseph episode was the success of the twenty-pound portable unit the summit crew sent down to the Lakes of the Clouds Hut to help coordinate the search.

Radios of those early days were imposing. They had heavy metal frames and coiling cables and ranks of glowing vacuum tubes and black boxes, with numerous separate elements ranged along the shelf; this is why a complete radio was called a "set," a term that survives in today's television market. So when the observatory crew of 1933 made a twenty-pound portable, they achieved an important breakthrough.

The AMC was so impressed by reports of the Joseph episode that their high-elevation huts—Lakes, Madison, and Greenleaf—were equipped with portable two-way radios against the needs of search and rescue. Word spread, and by 1938 the Swiss were equipping their mountain refuges with thirty-pound portables.

The most immediate and visible result of Simon Joseph's death was the project to rebuild all the cairns marking the trails above timberline on the Presidential Range: the cairns on the more popular trails were raised to a height of four feet and the interval was tightened to fifty feet. This enormous job was done by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, "CCC boys" as they were always called.

The CCC was one of the earliest of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives. Roosevelt took office on March 4, 1933 and on March 5 he convened a meeting of the secretaries of labor, agriculture, interior, and war, the director of the bureau of the budget, the judge advocate general of the army, and the solicitor of the department of the interior. They roughed out the plan for the CCC, the enabling legislation went to Congress on March 21, it passed on March 31, and on April 7 the first of four-million CCC boys signed up.

About two months later, a troop of CCC boys was assigned to work on the cairns of the Presidential Range. They were bunked three apiece in the AMC huts at Madison Springs on the Northern Peaks and at the Lakes of the Clouds, and two or three of them stayed in the summit hotel on Mount Washington. This caused some concern. The CCC was organized along distinctly military principles and soon after the CCC boys were on station, an army captain blustered into Joe's office in Pinkham Notch and inquired, with some heat, if there was enough air for the boys to breathe up there above timberline. Joe assured him that air was supplied in pretty generous quantities up there.

That summer the U.S. Forest Service put up the first generation of yellow metal signs on all trails that led above timberline: "STOP: This is a fine trail for hiking, but be sure you are in good physical condition, well rested and fed, have sufficient clothing, emergency food and equipment. Travel above timberline is hazardous. Climatic changes are sudden and severe at all seasons."

There were further consequences. Simon Joseph was the thirteenth person to die on the Presidential Range, and the New Hampshire State Development Commission launched an initiative designed to prevent further deaths. They sent word to the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Dartmouth Outing Club, and the Mountain Hotel Proprietors Association asking for their help in a crusade to educate hikers. One of the leading elements in this idea was that all people planning to climb Mount Washington should be examined by an official who was competent to judge the state of their clothing, their boots, and their health, and to test their knowledge of the mountain. A similar proposal went to the New Hampshire legislature, but it did not gain enough support to merit a vote. Neither of these precautionary measures was ever heard from again.

The CCC boys did their work so well that the cairns they built have lasted to the present day with very little additional maintenance, and the yellow signs still guard trails leading above timberline.