

Chapter Eleven

A DEADLY CROSSING IN GREAT GULF

SEPTEMBER OF 1934 WAS NOT A GOOD TIME TO BE STARTING college. The Great Depression was five years old and its grip was still growing tighter on the land; President Roosevelt's myriad New Deal agencies were everywhere, but they had not lifted the stock market out of the low 40s. On the other hand, more Americans were going hiking than ever before.

Several factors were at work. For one thing, the growing number of good roads in North America and increasingly reliable automobiles made backwoods outposts more accessible. Beyond that, the Depression did not close schools. Indeed, this was a period of large growth in private schools and the faculty had secure jobs, a relatively high income, and more than three months of vacation every summer. The hidden lesson here is that the more comfortably fixed American families kept their money. Finally, there was an unprecedented burst of exploration and mountaineering in North America that was discovering new mountains in the high ranges of Canada and Alaska and making first ascents that loomed large in the pages of publications such as the AMC's semi-annual *Appalachia*. Bradford Washburn led many of these expeditions, and for entry-level excursionists there were the more familiar reaches of the White Mountains with the AMC huts and dozens of lean-to shelters to welcome them.

My father taught at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, and he was the resident faculty member in the Saxton House, which was an academy dormitory with our family on the first floor and students on the second floor. In 1933, one of the students was John Pierce, conspicuous because his fine and enthusiastic singing voice could be heard all over the house. The Saxton House was not very large and my bedroom was a space under the stairs just large enough for a cot bed, and I was too young to remember John's singing.

In the fall of 1954, I was visiting Goddard College in northern Vermont as a prospective student, and when the tour was over I was deciding that I didn't like it very much. My mother had driven up with me, and while I was making the official tour she was making herself politely scarce in a far reach of the campus. She heard singing and followed the sound until she saw a man weeding a flower garden. He was on his knees in the corner of an L-shaped building, facing inwards, and my mother came up behind him and said, "John Pierce?"

It was. He was on the faculty at the college and he kept this garden in order because he could see it from his office, so he took me in hand and told me about the real Goddard. Mother and I returned to Deerfield and I packed a supply of clothes and went straight back to Goddard. I stayed there in one connection or another for eight years.

John Pierce became my closest friend on the faculty, and he and I and some other students often went hiking together. There was a chip in one of his front teeth and after I'd known him for a decent interval I asked what happened to it. He said that happened years earlier during a camping trip in Great Gulf, over on the Presidential Range. He said he'd been diving in the river and hit an underwater rock, and he never had the tooth fixed because it was a reminder. John never told me any more than that, and forty-four years would pass before I learned what happened in Great Gulf.

JEROME PIERCE
SEPTEMBER 1934

The Intercollegiate Outing Club Association was a vigorous force a generation or two ago and they published a song book, actually, *the* songbook,

what everyone called the IOCA book. This was the collection that had all the verses of all the songs—*Abdulah Bulbul Amir*, *The Eddystone Light*, *Oola Ski Yumper from Norway*, *Juanita*, *Who Threw the Overhauls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder*—and all the other favorites in the days when skiers and hikers actually did gather around the fire to sing. It was an institution and the catch was that no one wanted to be seen using the IOCA book; it was a point of honor to know all the words without it.

In September 1934, the IOCA had their annual College Weekend. This year there would be hiking on the Presidential Range; forty-two people signed up for the outing and fifteen of them were staying at the Great Gulf Shelter, which was also an institution. The first small refuge on the site was built in 1909, then replaced in 1927 with a new one rated at twenty-two hikers.

This shelter was a sort of grand central station for Mount Washington and the Northern Peaks. It was on the Great Gulf Trail, which is most conveniently entered from the Glen House or the AMC camp. The trail leads uphill from the shelter to the summit of Mount Washington and downhill to the highway, and the shelter was a quarter of a mile from the spot where the Wamsutta Trail led up Mount Washington on one side of the Gulf and the Six Husbands Trail led up Mount Jefferson on the opposite side. Two other trails branched off Six Husbands soon after it left the floor of the gulf, one was the Adams Slide Trail up Mount Adams and the other was the Buttress Trail to Mount Madison and the hut there.

Spaulding Lake lies high up in Great Gulf, a glacial tarn named for the first keepers of the Summit House, the family who tried to restore life in Lizzie Bourne. The West Branch of the Peabody River starts at the lake and flows 6.8 miles out to the main river in Pinkham Notch, running close to the Great Gulf Trail all the way down. The sides of the gulf are uniformly steep and they hold very little soil, the terrain is mostly ledge with an overburden of rough rock broken loose by millions of cycles of frost and thaw, and there's a thin mantle of soil and moss. This combination does not absorb much water and after a rainstorm the many streams running down the sides of the gulf quickly swell the West Branch to a torrent.

The IOCA group reached the Great Gulf Shelter Friday afternoon and found a considerable number of hikers already in residence. Nothing daunted, John Pierce and Hartness Beardsley built a snug little hemlock lean-to for Harty's sisters Mary and Connie and three other IOCA girls, and they



The Intercollegiate Outing Club Association chose the Great Gulf Shelter as their camp for their annual September hike in 1934. After a torrential rainstorm the tiny stream in the foreground flooded the shelter. A nearby river rose correspondingly and took Jerome Pierce's life.

improvised poncho shelters for themselves. The Pierces and the Beardsleys were neighbors back home in Springfield, Vermont, and they all knew each other very well.

An easterly wind had been blowing all day, which is an alarm bell for veterans of the Presidential Range. It brought intermittent rain on Friday, then during the night the wind moved into the southeast and a torrential downpour commenced in the hours before dawn. John and Harty kept getting up during the night to keep their campfire going, but the rain soaked everything else. A small stream runs down off Mount Washington and passes a few steps from the shelter, so small a stream that it would more properly be called a rill—two or three people with pails could move as much water. On Saturday morning, it had risen two and a half feet and threatened to flood the IOCA campsite.

The college crew decided to stay with their plans; this was, after all, the last weekend before the semester began. The Beardsley-Pierce group, along with a few friends, was going to start by climbing Mount Adams by way of

the Adams Slide Trail, which meant that they'd have to cross the West Branch immediately.

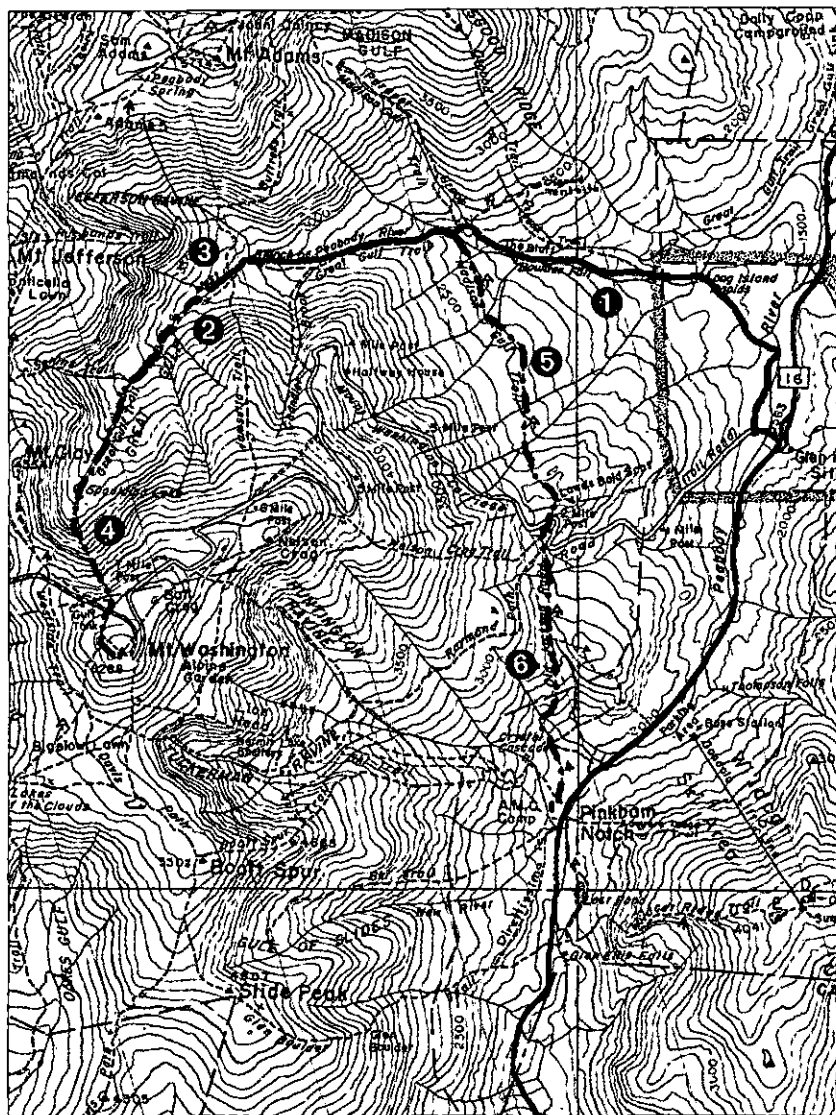
The course of the river is steep all the way down the gulf, mile after mile of rapids and falls studded with rocks ranging from the size of a plum to the size of a cottage. There are many trails and many streams in the gulf and the crossings are not difficult, most of them are a matter of hopping from one rock to another. The usual crossing from the Great Gulf Trail to the Adams Slide Trail requires from three to six hops, depending on length of leg and zest of hop, but the river is quite flat here and in normal times a dry crossing is routine.

The morning of September 9 was not normal times. The air had cleared by 10:00 A.M., but the West Branch had risen far above its normal level and the crossing to the Adams Slide Trail had no stepping stones showing at all, just a flood of churning water. Some other place to cross would have to be found if the IOCA crew was going to make the climb they'd planned for that day.

It probably would have been a better idea to change their plan. If they turned right instead of left at the Adams Slide junction they could go 1.6 miles up the Wamsutta Trail to 6-Mile on the auto road, a wonderful hike that gets above timberline quickly and opens spectacular views of Great Gulf and the Northern Peaks. If they wanted to go farther, they could connect there with the Alpine Garden Trail across the head of the ravines or up the Nelson Crag Trail to the summit of Mount Washington. Alternatively, they could continue along the Great Gulf Trail and on up the headwall to the Gulfside Trail, then follow this route two miles along the ridge to the Sphinx Trail down into the gulf and thence back to the shelter. Any of these choices would be easier and more interesting than the relentlessly steep Adams Slide Trail and would not involve major water crossings. Instead, the IOCA group stuck with their original plan.

Jerome Pierce had just graduated from high school in Springfield and at seventeen he was the youngest fellow on the trip. Also called "Jerry," he'd come along with his older brother John, who was going into his junior year at Middlebury College in Vermont, and Jerry would follow John to Middlebury the week after the trip was over.

John and Jerry both had strong personalities. John was assertive and apt to think that his view of any situation was the correct one, a quality which



- 1, 2. Jerome Pierce went up Great Gulf Trail to Great Gulf Shelter
3. Fell just above crossing
4. Friend ran for help up Great Gulf headwall to summit
- 5, 6. Mary Beardsley and companion continue to Pinkham for help via Madison Gulf Trail and Old Jackson Road

gained emphasis by the discovery that he usually turned out to be right. Jerry shared the assertive part but the edge was softened by his friendly and engaging character, and he was very popular with everyone who knew him.

Jerry was a good friend of Mary Beardsley. She was sixteen years old and an ardent hiker, and she liked to go on long walks with the Pierce boys or anyone else who shared her enthusiasms. People underestimated Mary at their peril and whenever she was out hiking it wouldn't be long before the others would be yelling, "Slow her down!" Mary and her family hiked the whole length of the Long Trail in Vermont, one section at a time, the ridge-line traverse of the Green Mountain from Quebec to Massachusetts. Mary was only partway through the Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, but her family let her come on the IOCA trip with her brother Harty because, it seemed to her, they'd let her go anywhere with her older brother.

The first day in Great Gulf certainly wasn't what the IOCA crowd had hoped for, but after cooking the best breakfast they could under the circumstances, John and Harty started working on the problem of high water in the West Branch. They thought they could build a bridge across the stream, so they took an axe and went looking for spruce trees that would be suitable for civil engineering.

Jerry Pierce had other ideas and, perhaps eager to prove his mettle to the college men he'd soon join, he went looking for his own place to cross the West Branch. The stream is quite flat below the trail crossing and all possible stepping stones were deep under the flood. There wasn't any possible footing just upstream, either, but about forty yards farther up he spotted a large pool with a curious waterfall above it. A room-size boulder jutted out from each bank and just above them a third boulder was securely lodged. The whole content of the river divided around the upper boulder and the two lower boulders forced the streams together again in two falls that met in a 45° angle. This appeared to be the only place to cross, because the river widened and flattened again just above this barrier and all the low rocks were covered.

These three boulders were so large that they rose above the flood and the space between them seemed a reasonable two-jump way to cross the river, so Jerry tried it. He missed his footing on the first jump and fell into one of the angled waterfalls. Two of the boulders, the center one and the far one, sloped inward on their downstream side and the massive force of the two opposing falls pushed him back into that undercut.

The IOCA boys immediately formed a human chain and on one try they got close enough to feel Jerry's head about three feet below the surface, but they could not pull him free, he seemed to be caught in the rocks and an old log under the waterfall. They found a slender spruce tree and quickly trimmed it and tried to use that to get Jerry free. They tried again and again, but the pool below the boulders was eight feet deep, the force of the stream swept them away again and again, and the full-body push of the water quickly stole their strength. They kept trying until they were exhausted, and then John kept diving and diving, trying to reach his brother at the base of the falls. John was being badly battered by the crushing falls and the underwater rocks but he kept trying and trying until at last he, too, had gone beyond his strength and his friends pulled him to shore.

Meanwhile, Mary Beardsley and one of the Middlebury students ran down the Great Gulf Trail and turned off on the Madison Gulf Trail and then the Old Jackson Road to find Joe Dodge at the AMC headquarters, an urgent dash of four and a half miles. As always, Joe dropped everything, gathered a crew at Pinkham, and headed for the trouble.

One of the other IOCA boys climbed 3.3 miles and 3,038 feet up the headwall of Great Gulf to get help from the summit of Mount Washington. CCC boys were billeted on the summit and at the Lakes of the Clouds and Madison Springs Huts and they'd been put to work at useful jobs on the range. Now they were back for their second summer and they'd become used to pitching in on unexpected jobs. The IOCA call was answered by three CCC boys, two men on the hotel staff who had worked in the AMC huts, and several other volunteers, and they all headed down into the Gulf.

The summit group got there first. Some of them cut several long poles in the woods while the rest of the hands piled rocks in the channel of one of the facing waterfalls to divert the flow into the other channel and take the criss-cross pressure off the rocks down below. They jammed the pole under the waterfall and anchored it on shore, and then they worked their way down the pole and groped around under the fall and in the whiteout of the foam.

They found that Jerry's feet were wedged between two rocks so his head was held underwater, and it was obvious that the IOCA group never had any chance of pulling him free. Now the group from the summit retrieved his body and they'd just started down the trail when they met Joe Dodge and his group coming up with a stretcher to complete the carry to the Glen House.

Mr. and Mrs. Pierce had been notified and they drove up to the Glen House. Many of the others on the IOCA trip were there, and Harty Beardsley went to the train station in Gorham and took his friend's body home to Springfield. John was at the Glen House, too, and didn't want much company. Instead, he found a piano and sat there for a long time improvising quiet laments in all the minor keys he knew.

NOT LONG BEFORE THE TRIP TO GREAT GULF, JERRY PIERCE GAVE his mother subscriptions to all her favorite magazines. That way, he thought, she wouldn't be so lonely when both her sons were away at Middlebury College. After the news from Great Gulf, she never let the subscriptions lapse.

The two Beardsley girls returned to school the week after the trip, Mary to Dana Hall and Connie to nearby Wellesley College. Church attendance was required and Dana Hall did not have its own chapel, so on Sunday the girls went to the services at Wellesley. The minister was Boynton Merrill, and when he rose for his sermon on the first Sunday of the new term he chose the Great Gulf accident as his text. Mary was stunned, and her sister was so upset that she had to be taken back to her dormitory.

The Great Gulf Shelter was the place of my own first overnight hike, in 1947. Later on, smaller companion shelter was built nearby and then another one further down the Gulf, then all three were demolished when the Great Gulf was designated a Wilderness Area and all human additions were removed except for the trail signs and the trails. The old clearing is still there beside the small brook, and it's still used by campers as a tent site.

John Pierce carried the memory of the IOCA trip for the rest of his life; he was haunted by the thought that the bruise on Jerry's head was from the pole he used when he tried to free him from the waterfall, and that was the cause of his brother's death. John named his first son Jerome, and he died before I found the doctor's report showing that the bruise came from a fatal impact on the rock before Jerry went into the water.