

Chapter Twelve

THE CHOICE OF PRESIDENTS

THE NORTHERN PEAKS AND THE SOUTHERN PEAKS OF THE Presidential Range are joined by Mount Washington, but that's about the only thing they have in common.

The Southern Peaks begin with Webster, which is more like one wall of Crawford Notch. Daniel Webster wasn't a president, but he was a son of New Hampshire who went on to debate Lincoln and climb Mount Washington in conditions he did not enjoy.

Next comes Jackson. Some believe it was named for the hugely popular sixth president, the first one who didn't seem vaguely like a king, the first one who shook hands with people. It was in fact named for Charles T. Jackson, the man who conducted New Hampshire's first geological survey, a study reflecting its author's primitive understanding of geology. Jackson's summit has a lovely all-around view and, although there's a steep scramble up the south side, the trail goes on through a swamp just past the summit on the north side, which isn't what one expects on a mountain ridge.

Then there's Pierce; it's a brisk 500 foot rise up the south side but there's no summit, just the end of a ridge leading north.

Next comes what we always called Pleasant Dome, and so did everyone else for most of its history, and it's the only one of the Southern Peaks that really stands up from the ridge. Then, without warning, the name was changed to Mount Eisenhower. This was because the military hero started toward the White House in the New Hampshire primary and, being a military man, he was the first president who had a chief of staff. This was Sherman Adams of New Hampshire, a peppery little wood chopper turned governor who quickly became known as the president's No man and brought his edibles to the White House in an old-fashioned woodsman's lunch pail, then patrolled the dining room to see how much time the rest of the staff were taking off for lunch.

Next past Pleasant Dome/Eisenhower there's what we always called Frankin Pierce; we thought it was actually named Franklin, but the venerable kite-flyer was never president, so we called it Franklin Pierce. Most people don't recognize that as a presidential name, but we knew he was the only president who came from New Hampshire. At any rate, this presumptive summit is so low it's easy to miss as you hike over it.

Finally there's Monroe, a crest that we admired because we all learned the Marine Corps Hymn during World War II, the service song that told about the halls of Montezuma and the shores of Tripoli, and it was president Monroe who sent the marines to the shores of Tripoli to smite the Barbary Pirates.

The sun always seems to be shining on the Southern Peaks, the trail along the crest flirts with the sweet shrubs and moss of timberline all the way, and the quirky elements of their topography and nomenclature and the pleasant trails that reach the crest of the ridge have always been the signals of a friendly nature.

The Northern Peaks seemed serious to me right from the beginning. There is no easy way up Madison and Adams and Jefferson, they leave timberline far below them and they drop straight from their sharp summits into the Great Gulf. This is what the nineteenth century artists had in mind when they contemplated the sublime acclivities and the dreadful abyss, and even the fairest days up there are tinged with threat.

In 1938, three friends were already weak when they began their climb up the Northern Peaks and they chose one of the most difficult routes to reach

the heights. They made it through their traverse to the Southern Peaks, but not by much. Then things got worse.

JOE CAGGIANO
AUGUST 1938

Joe Caggiano and Frank Carnese lived near each other on Long Island, New York, Phillip Turner lived near Boston, and when the three friends left for a week of hiking in the White Mountains they were thinking of ways to save money. The stock market hit bottom at 33.10 in 1932, when they left for their trip six years later it had climbed 14.8 points to 47.90, and during their four days in the mountains there was good news from the railroads, which led a strong advance of 0.7. But still, the three friends didn't have much money and they decided to economize on food and accommodations during the trip they planned.

There was some hiking experience in the group, but not much. Joe was *seventeen years old and he'd hiked on the Long Trail in Vermont*. Frank was twenty and he'd done some hiking on Bear Mountain, north of New York City. Phillip was twenty-two, he was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music near Boston, and had a job at Jordan Marsh in that city. He and Joe had met two years earlier on the Long Trail. Phillip was born in New Hampshire and he'd climbed Chocorua several times and had hiked a little further north once. None of them had any experience with conditions above timberline.

This trip would be a climb on the Presidential Range during the last week of August and the boys decided to travel light, so they saved weight by bringing a minimum of clothing. Sleeping bags were not yet widespread among hikers and the few types in the market were very expensive, so all three boys were using blanket rolls with rubberized ground cloths tied to their rucksacks, clumsy and inefficient loads that ranged from forty to sixty pounds.

The trio boarded the train on the afternoon of Saturday, August 20. Their first stop was Mount Chocorua, where they'd make a sort of shakedown hike to test their kit and their condition. Chocorua is thirty-five miles south of Pinkham Notch and it's one of the most popular mountains in the Northeast.

It has a rich Indian legend, it's right beside the main road, and the towering summit ridge of bare rock is framed by a stand of birch trees and reflected in a lake, a favorite with artists and calendar-makers everywhere.

The three friends reached Chocorua late Saturday evening and climbed three miles to a shelter on the upper shoulder of the mountain, where they camped for a rather short night. On Sunday morning they climbed another mile to the summit, then came down and got a ride to the AMC headquarters in Pinkham Notch. They hardly paused at Pinkham, though; their plan was to spend the night at Crag Camp, on the northwest side of Mount Adams and eight miles of stiff climbing from Pinkham. So they started out on the trail called the Old Jackson Road, connected with the Madison Gulf Trail into Great Gulf, and climbed on up the headwall of Madison Gulf.

This made a very long day, little less than a hiking frenzy. Each of the boys had been working at sedentary in-town occupations and Joe was just getting over a lingering illness; he weighed only 123 pounds and he was in reduced condition. The headwall of Madison Gulf is forbiddingly steep, all three of them had been feeling a bit ill since morning, and they'd eaten very little. So they gave up on their plans for Crag Camp and slept in the open at the top of Madison Gulf.

Hikers on the Presidential Range had enjoyed fair weather for the previous three days, with moderate wind and mild temperatures, but that was changing as Joe and his friends climbed the headwall of Madison Gulf. The Mount Washington Observatory is four air-line miles from the place the hikers slept, with the chasm of Great Gulf intervening, and the observatory records show that the wind was shifting from the northwest around into the south with a rise in humidity to 91 percent at midnight, sure signs of less pleasant things to come.

On Monday, Joe and his friends packed up their overnight gear and crossed the plateau to Madison Springs Hut, but in keeping with their economies they didn't partake of its comforts and services. They "hovered about," as one of the hutmen put it, then they climbed up the rocky slide on the shoulder of Adams and continued along the Gulfside Trail to Thunderstorm Junction at 5,500 feet before descending to Crag Camp, perched on the very edge of King Ravine at about 4,300 feet. The portents of the evening before had come to pass, and they'd been in clouds almost all day with temperatures in the low 50s and dropping into the 40s.



The Presidential Range makes its own weather, a result of the convergence of two jet stream tracks over the area and the sweep of prevailing winds driving warm valley air upslope into the cold air on the heights. This can create sudden and completely unexpected fog that has brought many hikers into serious trouble.

They'd been above timberline and fully exposed to a cold wind for all of this day, so the boys finally got comfortable at Crag Camp, their first good rest since leaving home three days earlier. Indeed, Crag Camp was very much like home. It was one of the private cabins built in the golden age of the Randolph Mountain Club, a quite improbable house pinned to a ledge overlooking King Ravine and fitted with a kitchen and bunk rooms, a fieldstone fireplace, a cast-iron kitchen stove, a library, and a parlor organ.

The weather broke in the hours surrounding midnight and a brilliant aurora borealis lit the sky, but the fair promise of morning faded and the fog closed in again as they climbed back to the crest of the ridge. The Gulfside Trail stretched 5.5 miles across the Northern Peaks to the summit of Mount Washington and the temperature was in the 40s all day long and the wind rose into the 50-mph range. The observatory calculates wind in two ways: momentary velocity and total miles passing the instrument in twenty-four

hours. During the previous day there were 337 miles of wind, this day there were 1,058. Conditions were so unpleasant that the boys spent the afternoon in the Summit House, then at about 5:00 P.M. they started down the Crawford Path to the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, 1.4 miles away and still above timberline.

They didn't stop there long, however, they went on another mile or so along the Crawford Path and made camp in the scrub growth just above timberline on the Southern Peaks, near the place Father Bill Curtis and Allan Ormsbee took refuge. They were not abundantly provided for this, but they found a soft place on the stony ground and made what Phil described as "a good supper," then they spread their blanket rolls on their ground cloths and lay down.

About midnight, it began to rain. They huddled under their ground cloths for two hours and waited for it to end, but it didn't end and at 2:00 A.M. they gave up. They left all their gear where it was and groped their way a mile back up the ridge to the hut. One of the hutmen heard them, so he got up and gave them some blankets and they lay down on the floor.

It was a short night and an uncertain start for the next day. The rain had broken into their first sleep, and the hutmen and early-rising hikers began moving around at first light. Phil Turner hiked back to their camping place and brought in their sodden gear, and when he returned Joe Caggiano realized that he'd left his knife where they'd camped, so he and Phil went back to look for it, without success. When they were all back at the hut the crew offered to fix a late breakfast for them, but the boys declined the chance. They each had a cup of coffee and a piece of leftover corn bread and started back across the range, retracing their ridge-top steps of the day before, but under far worse weather conditions.

This was a curious plan. If they'd kept going down the Crawford Path past the Lakes of the Clouds, they would have been hiking on new and much easier terrain and seeing new views on the Southern Peaks, and they would not have had large verticals to deal with. If the weather continued wet and windy they'd have the shelter of thick spruce trees for a large part of the way, and they could look forward to the snug comforts of Mizpah Springs shelter at the end of a moderate day's hike.

Instead, they turned north again, and it was not a good start. The only dry clothes they had were at the bottom of their packs—shorts, sweaters, and low

socks—and that was not what was needed for this day. The rain turned heavy at 8:00 A.M. but the boys persisted and got on the trail two hours later, still in heavy rain with the temperature dropping into the 30s and winds gusting to more than 50 miles an hour on the summit just above them.

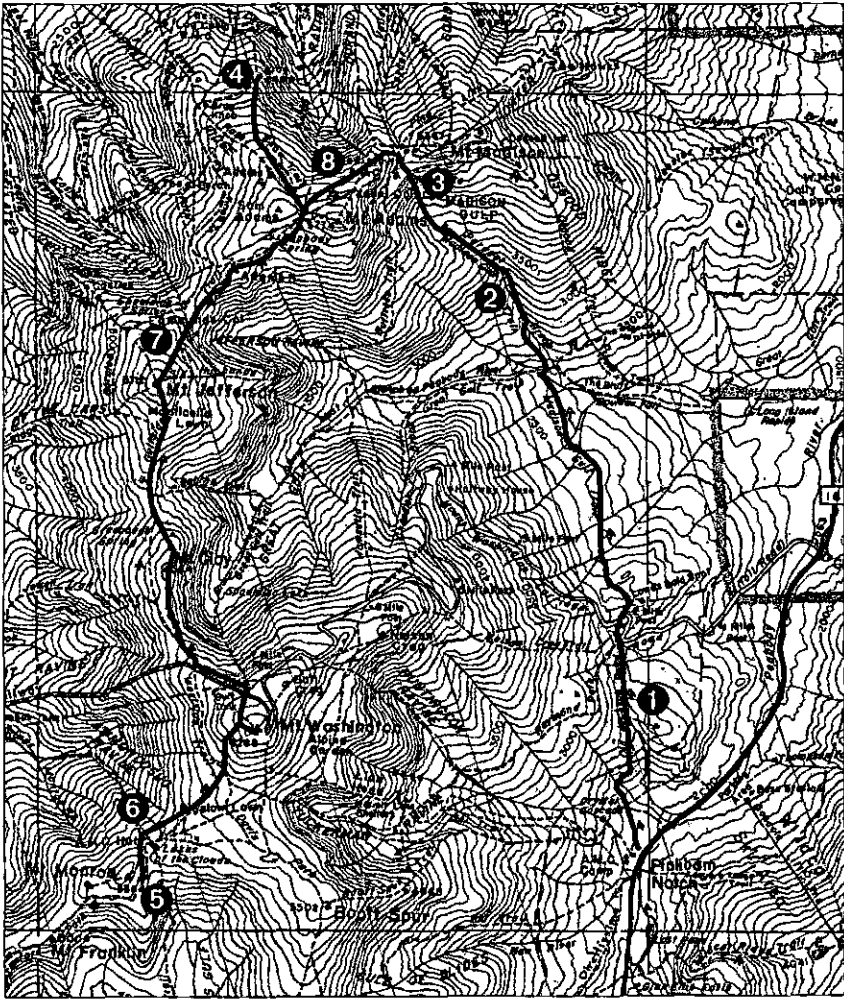
The Westside Trail skirts the summit cone of Mount Washington, then meets the Gulfside Trail to cross the Northern Peaks to Madison Spring Hut. As before, the boys planned to turn off at Thunderstorm Junction and go down to Crag Camp. They were virtually retracing their steps, but this day was cold, wet, and windy, with dense fog settling onto the range early in the afternoon, so it was slow and treacherous going over the slippery rocks.

The embattled hikers fell again and again, but they kept going. In fact, they tried to go as fast as they could on the theory that the exercise would keep them warm. It didn't, it made them more tired and more unsteady on their feet. Now there was sleet mixing with the rain as they crossed the saddle between Clay and Jefferson. Here the trail starts to climb toward Monticello Lawn below the summit cone of Jefferson. In fair weather this is one of the sweetest places in the mountains, so level and grassy that in earlier years there had been a croquet set for the pleasure of passing hikers.

This was not a day for croquet. Joe and his friends met two other hikers on Monticello Lawn, hurrying to get out of the storm. They saw that Joe Caggiano was, as one of them said, "blue from the knees down," and they urged the boys to turn around and come with them down the Sphinx Trail, a quick and well-protected one-mile descent to the floor of Great Gulf, then an easy 0.6 to Great Gulf Shelter. They boys said they were getting along all right and they'd get warmed up and dried out when they reached Crag Camp.

Joe and Phillip and Frank stayed together until they were skirting the summit of Jefferson and heading for Edmands Col. They'd been exposed to cold, wet weather and the full force of the wind ever since they left the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, they'd been sleeping in unfamiliar outdoor beds for four nights, they did not have warm clothes, and they hadn't had anything to eat since the coffee and corn bread at the hut.

The Gulfside Trail is steep and rough as it pitches down into Edmands Col, difficult footing even in good weather. Somewhere on this stretch, one of the straps on Joe's pack broke. Frank stopped to help him, but Phillip Turner didn't realize what had happened and he kept going. He wrote later, "The wind was so bad, the fog was so thick and the wind so heavy, biting



- 1, 2. Joe Caggiano went up Old Jackson Road and Madison Gulf Trail
3. Spent first night near Madison Spring Hut
4. Spent second night at Crag Camp
5. Across Gulfside Trail and Crawford Path to start third night near trail below Mount Monroe
6. Forced to Lakes of the Clouds Hut by rain in middle of night
7. Caggiano began faltering near Edmands Col and Frank Carnese went for help
8. Caggiano collapsed near Gulfside Trail above King Ravine

into us with a chill that turned us limp and weak, that we couldn't see more than ten or fifteen feet and, somehow, despite our best efforts, we lost sight of one another."

This is a terrifying situation. Everything turns gray and even a person who grew up on these trails, someone who knows exactly where he is and where the next trail junction is and which is the quickest way to shelter, someone who is *at home* on the Northern Peaks, even someone like that will feel a kind of sudden dread.

These three flatlanders had none of those advantages but all of the dread. Later, Phillip wrote, "Joe and Frank were walking ahead of me near Edmonds Col, picking their way slowly and carefully—and then they were not there. The wind was so terrific and the rain and sleet were so weakening that I was nearly all in. A great terror came over me, I didn't know which way to search for Joe and Frank. Again and again I shouted their names. All I heard in answer was the fearful howl of the gale. Whenever I stopped to get my bearings, I nearly froze. My feet were so heavy they were like lead, my head was pounding terribly, and I began to wonder if I'd ever make shelter. I kept struggling along, half in a coma, and every step took all of my will power." Phillip was ahead of his companions as he descended into the wind tunnel of Edmonds Col, but he didn't know it. He went on through the col and followed the Gulfside Trail up the long shoulder of Adams toward Thunderstorm Junction.

As badly as Phillip's day was, it was worse for Joe and Frank. Of those two, Joe was in greater difficulty. Slight of frame and weakened before the trip began, he did not have much reserve strength to call on. Joe's pack was the heavier of the two, so Frank took it and they reached the bottom of Edmonds Col and headed up the south slope of Adams, still facing into the worst of the storm. Their packs were very difficult to manage and seemed to contribute to their frequent falls, so when they reached Peabody Spring, about a mile and a quarter from Madison Spring Hut, they dropped their packs and their extra clothing and their blanket rolls.

Half a mile farther on Joe fell and cut his knee badly. Frank was not doing much better, but he managed to get his friend back to his feet, then after a few more steps Joe staggered and fell again and this time he couldn't get up. Frank decided that the best thing to do was leave Joe and go on to Madison

Spring Hut for help, so he found a grassy place between two rocks and put Joe in that meager refuge and headed for the hut.

Phillip Turner had already reached the refuge: "Even when by good fortune I found the Madison Springs Hut looming before me, I had all I could do to finish the last few yards. I couldn't have gone another ten feet. They told me that at the hut, and I knew it. I managed to stammer out that my two companions were up on the trail."

It was now mid-afternoon and the hut was full of hikers waiting out the storm, with hutmen Bob Ohler, Fred "Mac" Stott, and Ernie Files keeping an eye on things. One of them put Phillip in a bunk, wrapped him in blankets, and gave him something hot to drink, but Mac Stott had an uneasy feeling. It seemed to him that Phillip was in pretty good shape and not saying much about his friends, and Mac wondered if he'd become separated from them by accident or if he'd left his friends behind.

There was no time to extend these thoughts now, though, so Mac and Ernie recruited one of the weather-bound hikers, gathered up their emergency gear, and made ready to start up the Gulfside to find Phillip's companions. Just as they were leaving the hut, Frank Carnese staggered out of the wind-driven fog and collapsed in the dooryard of the hut. The crew carried him in and, with the last of his strength, Frank told them that Joe Caggiano had fallen, that he couldn't go on, and that he'd left him in the lee of a rock about half a mile up the trail.

Mac Stott and Ernie Files and their recruit took off up the Gulfside at a fast trot. This left only crewman Bob Ohler at the hut, but "The Red Shirts" were there, a hiking club of twenty ministers from Massachusetts, and they had a helpful and steadying effect in a situation that was becoming difficult. Addison Gulick was another guest, he was a professor in the geology department of the University of Missouri and he asked what he could do to help, then he started down the Valley Way to the Ravine House, where he called Joe Dodge at the AMC headquarters in Pinkham Notch.

As the Gulfside Trail leaves Madison Spring Hut it crosses a patch of stunted spruce, then rises sharply up a stretch of loose rocks to the ridge and begins a long rising traverse across the northwest side of Adams to Thunderstorm Junction, a mile from the hut. Mac and Ernie and their volunteer went all the way to the junction and found no sign of the fallen hiker, so they

turned around and spread their forces: the volunteer stayed on the trail, Ernie went upslope about thirty yards and Mac went downslope the same distance, as far as they could go without losing sight of the man in the middle. Then they started back toward the hut.

They found Joe Caggiano at 3:30 in the afternoon. He was about half a mile along the Gulfside from the hut and 150 feet north of the trail and he was wearing only shorts and a light sweater with his boots. He was not in the sheltered place Frank had described; he'd used the last of his strength to get a few yards farther along toward the hut, and then he died.

Just as they found the body, Sumner Hamburger came running by on the Gulfside. He was on the crew at the hut and he was coming back from days off. He kept running and brought news of Joe's death to the hut and said they needed a stretcher up on the ridge. Madison Spring Hut was provided with tiers of fold-up pipe-frame bunks, so one of these was unbolted and a crew of volunteers went up to retrieve Joe's body.

They took the body into the kitchen by the back door. Bob Ohler was a medical student at Harvard and he said they should prepare Joe's body for the carry down to the valley before it began to stiffen up, so they tied a prune crate to a packboard, put Joe's body on this makeshift seat, wrapped it in blankets, and tied it to the packboard. "Then," as Mac Stott remembers, "in absolute silence, we carried him through the main room and out the front door. Four of us alternated in the carry and halfway down the Valley Way we met Joe Dodge leading a dozen rescuers. The next morning's *Boston Herald* carried it on page one."

Frank Carnese and Phillip Turner rested overnight at the hut. During those hours the wind veered into the northwest; it was the classic pattern for a northwest clear-off on the range, and the next day dawned so brilliantly fair that the ocean was visible from the summit of Mount Washington. This weather had come too late for Joe and his friends, so the survivors went down the Valley Way to the Ravine House in Randolph. Phillip's two brothers drove up from Boston and started them on their way home. They were still traveling as economically as they could, with severe costs.

AS OFTEN HAPPENS, THIS ACCIDENT LED TO COUNSELS AND PLANS in the AMC and the Forest Service. The AMC's Committee on Trail, Hut

and Camp Extensions took up the questions left by Joe Caggiano's death and their report was published in June 1941.

"In view of the number of diverging trails which lead to shelters," they wrote, "it is obvious that there would be little danger if trampers would only use reasonable judgement and descend one of these trails in case of trouble. The Committee felt, however, that they could not ignore the safety of the many trampers who will not use such judgement." As a result of this reading of topographic and human nature, "public safety makes a refuge of some sort desirable." Given the length of the Gulfside and the layout of trails on the Northern Peaks, it was persuasively obvious that such a shelter should be in Edmands Col on the Gulfside, just above timberline on the crest of the ridge and equidistant from almost everything.

All the AMC huts had a refuge room left open in the off-season, but despite this convenience, hikers repeatedly burned everything flammable in the place and stole the few utensils left for their convenience, and sometimes they broke through stout defenses and got into the main hut to do more damage there. So the committee decided on a minimalist approach and recommended that, "Unless such a refuge could be in charge of a caretaker, it should be so constructed as to discourage camping and any use except in case of emergency. It should be built of stone with a non-combustible roof supported on steel rafters. No wood should be used in its construction, and it should contain no equipment whatsoever.

"Regardless of the erection of a refuge, conspicuous signs should be placed at important junctions on the Gulfside Trail indicating the direction and distance of the nearest or best shelter in case of emergency."

For most of remembered history, the nearest refuge to Edmands Col was the Perch, 1.2 miles down the Randolph Path from the col. J. Rayner Edmands himself built it for his own convenience in 1892, a curiously elaborate shelter tucked in well below timberline and next to an unfailing stream. The Randolph Mountain Club took it over and it had been a great favorite of hikers ever since. But the Perch eventually fell into disrepair and the RMC announced that it would be abandoned. In light of this development, the AMC committee recommended that if a new refuge was not approved for Edmands Col, a standard lean-to shelter should be built on the site of the Perch. The report was approved by the club and a copy was sent to the Forest Service.

The United States entered World War II six months after the report appeared, all work on the range was suspended, and the 6.3-mile span of exposed ridge between Madison Spring Hut and relief on the summit of Mount Washington or at the Lakes of the Clouds Hut remained without any shelter until 1956, when a refuge was built in Edmands Col.

This was Spartan beyond anything the committee could probably have imagined, and if the 1901 refuge on Bigelow Lawn was "far too uncomfortable to attract campers," the refuge in Edmands Col positively repelled such visits. It looked like half of a large corrugated steel pipe bolted to a concrete pad, there was a crawl-in entrance and the dark interior dripped moisture and rattled with metallic echoes. But hiker traffic on the range was rising sharply in the 1960s and '70s and the Edmands Col refuge became an overnight destination despite its uninviting characteristics. The Forest Service decided that this non-emergency use was blighting the grand setting and delicate environment, and every trace of the refuge was removed about 20 years after it was built. The high Northern Peaks traverse has been pristine ever since, but, happily, the RMC had succumbed to the pressure of its own history and the Perch was rebuilt in 1948.