



Going Home to the Hills

BY ERNEST F. IMHOFF '59

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Above: Cub Scout hikers pause in the Taconic Mountains in 1945. (The author, 8, is at left; his mother is fourth from left.) Top: The misty foothills of Greylock and clouds hide the summit of the 3,491-foot peak—the highest in the state.

Growing up in Williamstown in the 1940s, we found our playgrounds as often in the purple mountains as we did on the ball fields.

We camped out among the summit rocks of Pine Cobble and watched the lights go out one by one in town below. Some folks stayed up all night down there.

On Stone Hill, we climbed young trees, bent with them and parachuted to earth on top-heavy masts of our meadow vessels. I broke an arm doing that.

In summer, our Cub Scout den sallied forth from Petersburg Pass, hiked north and found Snow Hole. It was a deep crevasse where we threw ice balls at each other.

To the east beyond North Adams, we swam in cold North Pond in the Hoosac Mountains to see who could stay in the longest.

Hiking to the ledges of the Dome past White Oaks took us into a new world, at least on the map—Vermont's Green Mountains. You could also hit Vermont by walking past the Cobble on the Appalachian Trail merging with the Long Trail, taking you clear to Canada or Maine, too far for a day hike but enough to plant seeds of dreams.

On Northwest Hill, eyes were shut tight as ears heard ghost stories the older devils told at the Boys Club's summer encampment. "The Bloody Headless Berkshire Beast" comes to mind.

The woods beckoned, with some help. Brother Bill and I—and often our friends and fellow Cub Scouts—were enticed up one mountain and down another hill by our aggressively

ambulatory mother. Martha's hiking DNA was nurtured as a girl beneath the Brocken in the Harz Mountains, famous in German literature as the peak where Goethe, Heine and other roaming poets discovered good writing material.

Our mountains weren't just purple and pretty as in the song "The Mountains." Some days they were the dark, cold, ugly Andes when expeditions got too long, as in "Let's quit this stupid hike." Yet the hills were for hiking, not for singing.

There were two kinds of elevations circling Williamstown like two rings of wagon trains. There were hills—junior mountains near downtown for little kids—like Northwest, Birch, Buxton and Bee. One on Main Street, where a Civil War soldier stands sentinel, was mysteriously called Consumption Hill.

Sheep Hill, on Route 7 just before the 1896 House, was for everyone. People who wanted to ski in town went there and used a rope tow that pulled them all the way up the sloping field and made one's arm muscles burn.

Big people climbed to higher elevations in three states. Pine Cobble (1,893 feet), The Dome (2,748) and Berlin Mountain (2,818), barely in New York, were considered outlying Himalayas. Then came the day we were ready for Mount Everest—Mount Greylock (3,491 feet), the highest peak from there to Cape Cod. We scrambled up the Roaring Brook Trail to the War Memorial and down again. Dead-tired climbers often despise the mountain at the bottom—we did that day—but after just one night of sleep think about the next adventure up high. We were soon up another Greylock route.

We learned these were the Taconic Mountains and the Green Mountains and the Hoosac Mountains, not the "Berkshire Mountains." Berkshire was just the name of our county.

Hiking was passé to me when I was at Williams, except as an escape. In later years, I took up frequent scrambling in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and Maine and in thinner air out West.

Whenever in Williamstown I wondered if the mountains had changed, as had the jammed-up campus, which increasingly looked like the Last Anxious Stand of the Village Green. I returned periodically, re-entered the hills and recognized old friends in the landscapes. A camera was in the backpack.

The hills of home are not quite eternally unchanging as the Bible says. Most of Williamstown's woods were once cleared by farmers and loggers, but the vegetation returned in the same 19th century. Trails were re-routed to avoid erosion. Small rock slides developed. New paths sprouted, one honoring the College's Robert R.R. Brooks, who loved and cared for the hills as few others. Large meadows were overgrown. Encroachment of houses, development schemes for Greylock, ski area clearances, acid rain and bark beetles keep threatening deep woods. The Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation and other forces help save the land.

Interesting items are there for the looking. On Mount Williams, a black bear wandered around. College athletes ran up Pine Cobble. Bits of old airplane wreckage on Greylock lay under leaves. A bird man flew off the Taconic Crest on his hang glider.

The hills of home showed their old, beautiful stuff. The purple hills were also leafy green, autumn brown, storm gray, maple red and snow white. Howard Simpson '50, comfortably at home in the outdoors, his wife Kitty and my colleague Fred Rasmussen joined me for a Baltimoreans' stroll on Pine Cobble. The blueberries were ripe.

There was ice in summer again at Snow Hole. Although new housing was at the foot, Pine Cobble's ridge on East Mountain was intact and free of trash



KITTY SIMPSON

This page (at left): The author (seated), Howard Simpson '50 (center) and Fred Rasmussen study Williamstown from the summit of Pine Cobble; (below) the Long Trail leads to Canada, 265 miles away.



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and development despite actual dreams fearing these things.

From the wide open summit of Berlin Mountain—rare in the Berkshires—Greylock remained only a bump on the Range among siblings Prospect, Williams, Fitch and Saddle Ball. Its watershed ran full with spring waters, and the woods were thick. On the opposite side were the Helderbergs near Albany and the foothills of the Adirondacks.

Mountains teach. One winter day low clouds, snow on the quartzite and flurries in the air turned Eph's Lookout on Pine Cobble into a gloomy outlier. These elements made the hiker feel properly insignificant just two-and-a-half miles from town. The hiker sensed in clearer perspective his place in the world, a good reason for keeping mountains safe from people. ■

Ernest F. Imhoff '59 spent most of his career writing for The Baltimore Sun Papers. He went on to hike higher in New England and out West and now is also an ordinary seaman on a revived World War II Liberty ship in Baltimore.