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BLOG: WHITE MOUNTAIN ATTRACTIONS EDUCATIONAL TOUR 2017

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By: *Dwight S. Haynes, GSA Discover Wild NH Class of 2008*

On Monday, June 19 at 7 a.m. I was off for a 4-day tour of 17 of the top natural and man-made tourist attractions in the White Mountains, the 59th Annual Educational Tour sponsored by the White Mountains Attractions Association. In my 8 years as a Granite State Ambassador at the kiosk in front of the State House I have logged almost 500 volunteer hours; all I had to pay for was gratuities, as food, lodging, and bus transportation were provided and we were treated like royalty. The hope is that we will continue to help visitors, be even better informed, more enthused, and able to say: "I've been there, done that". I didn't have to drive. Maryellen drove me across town where I met Norma Angwin, and Connie Loken from Hollis who drove us to Polar Caves in Rumney, west of Plymouth, where we became a party of some 30 people, including some AAA and Chamber of Commerce people.

Being the oldest person in the group and not having traveled the way I used to before my double knee surgery 4 ½ years, I was a bit anxious as to how it all would work out. It's a challenge to keep the cane with me at all times, especially for climbing and descending, set up the Bi-Pap machine each night in a different place, keep track of 2 hearing aids and batteries, 3 pairs of glasses, daily vitamin pills plus a pill and Flonase for nasal congestion, and eye drops twice daily, and carry rain gear, water bottle, notebook, etc. in my knapsack. Oh, to be young and care-free again! Despite the challenges, my love for travel was reawakened, and I had a great time!

Mike Duprey, old enough to be retired, has been conducting this tour so well for years and was scheduled to guide us; but a health problem prevented his coming. To the rescue came Estlin Loparto, 24, who worked at Lost River one season, has traveled in several nations, and works in the White Mountains Attractions Association office in North Woodstock. Many of us liked her as soon as we met her in the parking lot. She did a great job as our tour guide,

First stop - Polar Caves. 50,000 years ago, a continental glacier moved southward over New Hampshire. As the sheet thawed, great blocks of granite fell from Hawk's Cliff. These massive granite blocks created a series of caves and passageways- great for exploring. After some Dunkin Donut munchkins & coffee, we started walking, some 300 steps up, but oh, such fascinating formations and such beauty to behold. The huge glacial rock is some 50 mil. lbs., has huge sections at different angles, offers different colors with different minerals and various forms of lichen and moss. I was fascinated not only by the rocks, but also by the trees, different kinds and different shades of green typical of late spring; and some of the trees are growing right out of the rocks! Apparently, seeds scattered by wind or birds find a home in the cracks of rocks; then dirt and moisture collect, allowing the seeds to grow roots below and seedlings above! Wow!

During a brief stop at Alpine Adventures in Lincoln we saw different kinds of zip lines with varying degrees of adventure, plus a steep slide with tubes flying and landing on a huge air bag. The Flume Gorge has a natural 800-ft. chasm with waterfalls, covered bridges, glacial boulders, and a scenic pool. Some did the long walk around; some of us hiked up about a 1/2mile up into the gorge - a bit steep, but worth it! I was there years ago; but before I read a great geology textbook in early retirement. I now have at least some clue as to what it's all about and why! As I experienced the awe and mystery of God's continuing creation I was moved almost to tears.

The Flume, like so many parts of our trip, provided a feast for all the senses with the different colors to see in the rocks and trees, the sound of rushing water, the smell of moist vegetation, the touch of different surfaces, and then the tastes in the cafeteria! In the gorge I was reminded of the rain forests in Puerto Rico and NW Oregon. I learned that the walkways, railings, and platforms in the gorge, weighing 300-4000 lbs., are removed by hand each fall because of the huge pieces of ice that form on the walls of the gorge and then later come crashing down. As I was walking down the steeper part, a young woman, appropriately named Angela, offered me her steady hand.

Heading north on Rte. 3, the road soon joins the I-93/Franconia Notch Parkway, which takes us through the spectacular scenery of Franconia Notch State Park along a route framed by the towering peaks of the Kinsman Range and Cannon Mtn. on the left and the Franconia Range and Mt. Lafayette on the right. The trip up Cannon Mountain in the Aerial Tramway offered such scenic vistas and also brought back memories of my having climbed Cannon a few times. The trees in June provide many different shades of green. While at the top, some clouds paid a visit to remind us how the weather keeps changing in the Franconia Notch. In descending, we saw the beautiful white blossoms of the mountain ash trees.

Next, we toured the Omni Mt Washington Resort in Bretton Woods. I'd seen this huge hotel in the distance many times over the years, but never close up! Despite some rain showers, the Cog Railway and the summits of Mts. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Eisenhower, etc. were all in and out of the clouds and clearly visible from the hotel porch. It was as though the clouds were tickling the summits while we were busy enjoying delicious hors d'oeuvres and later a full course meal. This hotel provides one of the most scenic spots in all of NH and I've seen

quite a few in my time.

Ron LaBelle was a great room-mate. He thought I was a pretty cool cat for an 80-year old. He said that in the course of our first day we had walked 5 ½ miles, climbed the equivalent of 22 flights, and walked about 12,000 steps! After sleeping quite well, breakfast was out of this world with an omelet made to order. By the time I got through breakfast I had eaten 3 fruits and 2 vegetables. I was ready to take on the new day. Most days we were up at 6:00 a.m. and back in our rooms by 9:00 p.m.

Tuesday, June 20. Santa's Village - with such imagination and creativity was better than I expected. Santa was there, but so also the 3 wise men on camels, the Holy Family, and Christmas carols! How can this be in a park that caters to the public? Because it is owned and operated by a family, not by some big business with corporate headquarters far away. The theme is not just Santa, but fun, joy, kindness, and love. The buildings and grounds are beautiful with wonderful landscaping – trees, shrubs and lots of flowers.

Let's begin with your own gingerbread man to decorate and to eat! Now, take these snack pieces of something to feed the reindeer; and so I did. This place is interactive with lots of touchy, feely stuff! Climb up these stairs and take a nice ride around and above the park. As you leave you are handed a picture of the 3 of you. That's what was with the light flash part way along. Then, if you'd like, you can ride the dodgems just like the ones I rode at Canobie Lake Park 70 years ago. I'd love for us to bring Asher, our 5-year old great grandson, here next December, to be here when the thousands of little Christmas lights are turned on – a memorable sight I am sure. Before we left the owner's 12-year old son came on the bus to thank us for coming and to invite us to come back again!

Before going up the 8-mile Mt. Washington Auto Road by Stage Van, we saw an old horse-drawn stage coach in the museum, as well as early and later cars that were used. The summit of Mt. Washington is the highest peak in the northeast at 6,288 feet. For cars, motorcycles, runners, and walkers (when permitted), you start in the parking lot at about 1,500 feet for an elevation gain of some 4,700 feet! I climbed it twice in my youth from Pinkham Notch, first with the Bates College Outing club and then with the youth group of our Lisbon Methodist Church. The views from the Auto Road were stunning and the driver's comments were so interesting. I was reminded of the Alps in Europe and mountains in Alaska. We were to have an hour at the summit; but the weather changed quickly and we were asked to head now to the Mt. Washington Cog Railway for the sharp descent – as much as 37 degrees. It's all quite fascinating.

Following Rte. 302 to Bartlett we come to the Attitash Mountain Resort with 5 downhill ski areas, miles of cross-country trails, and lots more things to see and do: an alpine slide, a mountain coaster, mountain biking, bungee trampoline, etc. The heavy spring rains delayed the preparations for their summer opening. We were going to try one of those things (I now can't remember); but the manager pointed to the dark, heavy, ominous clouds coming down the valley and suggested we try it another time.

So, off we went to the Attitash Grand Summit Hotel and Conference Center. Before another full-course dinner there's the cocktail hour with delicious hors d'oeuvres. We get to meet the owners and operators of some of the different White Mountain attractions. They are glad to have us becoming better educated, more informed, even more enthused about the various tourist attractions. By the time we finish dinner and dessert it's almost time to call it a day, another full day.

Wed., June 21. After breakfast and a quick bus ride to Bartlett, we board the Conway Scenic Railroad "Budd Car" for a carefully narrated one-way ride from Bartlett to North Conway, where we get to walk around this old railroad station. Next, we're off to tour the Cranmore Mountain Resort, which is undergoing major construction with older buildings being torn down and replaced by larger, more modern buildings. There are many different trails, rides, etc. It's still a bit "pre-season", but many in our group took the special buggy ride up the mountain. Coming down you can control the speed by moving it forward for faster or back for slower. Some went zipping down and around the curves with great gusto while also enjoying the scenery.

Then, we travel Rte. 16 North to Story Land in Glen, another family favorite, where you can explore the wonderful world of childhood with all sorts of rides, activities, and shows – so much imagination, creativity, and color - all in an attractive setting nicely landscaped. There's lots of animation and lots of interactive, touchy feely stuff. Some of those wonderful stories from childhood days really come alive. In a show at the theatre we saw and then met a beautiful princess - a living doll! That's the way Jane Russell described God! 2 days earlier, Estlin, our tour guide had circulated a clipboard sheet listing 3 options for today's lunch. Upon leaving Storyland as we boarded the bus, we received our box lunch. My chicken salad was right tasty.

Continuing north past Jackson to Pinkham Notch, we head over to Wildcat Mtn., a ski area which offers a scenic gondola ride to the summit for incredible views of Mt. Washington and Tuckerman Ravine. It also offers a thrilling ZipRider trip down the mountain. In a boat the waves underneath provide a rocking motion. In a gondola you are suspended in mid-air and the invisible rocking motion comes from above! I have wanted for years to take this gondola ride with its splendid scenery. But having had a terrible time with vertigo just a few weeks ago, I decided not to risk getting dizzy and sick all over again; so I walked uphill a bit where I had a fantastic view of Mt. Washington looking from the east. At Bretton Woods 2 days earlier, we were looking from the west. There are 2 sides to every story; but how often to do you get to see 2 sides of the biggest mountain in the northeast!

In heading south back down Rte. 16, at Intervale there is a stunning view from the south looking up the Mt. Washington Valley! Then, further south, from Conway heading west to Lincoln we take the 35-mile Kancamagus Highway (a National Scenic Byway) which climbs to nearly

3,000 feet providing dramatic views, stunning overviews. I've been over this road many times; but usually from the west. I was eager to see it this time from the east. I woke up just in time to realize I had missed 2 of the best overlooks! Apparently, several others had taken a nap, too. This busy tour was catching up with us!

I had driven by [Whale's Tale Water Park](#) in Lincoln many times over the years; but I had no idea what an attractive and interesting place this is with water rides and slides for different ages and different skill levels. There's a ¼-mile tranquil river, a huge wave pool, and even a state of the art surf simulator in which the trick is to go with the water as it propelled up the slide! It was time now to head to Woodward's Resort there in Lincoln to freshen up for the reception and dinner. Many of the owners/managers of the various attractions, also staff and members of the White Mountain Attractions Assoc. were with us for the evening. They responded to questions and comments that many of us shared from our 4-day tour. We heard they were impressed by some of our questions.

All the while, we're being treated to specially prepared shrimp and other delicious hors d'oeuvres followed by a delicious full-course meal with a choice of 5 entrees I was very interested in 4 of the 5. I managed to gain just 1 pound in the 4 days, mainly because of all the walking and climbing we did – a challenge following my double knee surgery 4 ½ years ago. It is a good thing I have a sturdy cane.

Thurs., June 22. After another amazing breakfast made to order with eggs, French toast, orange juice, etc., we departed to North Woodstock for [Lost River Gorge and Boulder Caves](#) in Kinsman Notch. Lost River is so named because it is in and out of sight! We were invited to discover the beauty and mysteries of the majestic granite walls, spectacular waterfalls, and rugged boulder caves. There's Suspension Bridge, Twisting and Turning Boardwalk, and Paradise Falls. I think, like Polar Caves and the Flume Gorge earlier, Lost River is a geologist's paradise.

Once again, I was fascinated by the different colors and formations, centuries in the making. Speaking of color, typically at this time of year the new growth on the balsam, spruce, and other evergreens will have maybe 2 inches of lighter green at the end of each part of the branches. This year, because of all the rain that's come, this lighter green growth is often 4 to 5 inches! It adds to the beauty. It was the same at Santa's Village. I don't remember seeing such before. Maybe, I'm more observant, more aware of the feast for all the senses, more appreciative of God's continuing creation in my old age!

Next, we go to [Clark's Trading Post](#) made famous by its bear shows and train rides. It has been providing family entertainment for 85 years. Now, you can even try a Segway. It's early in the season and already there are lots of people there. One person, from Concord, yells out to me by name. Later, I learned who it was. After touring the grounds and having pizza and ice cream for lunch, we head for the [Hobo Railroad](#) for a relaxing, round-trip excursion along the Pemigewasset River offering a variety of open vistas along the way. The Conductor saw to it that we got a snack. There's even a Dinner Train available. Then by bus we head east again to [Loon Mountain](#), home of NH's longest scenic gondola skyride. There's also a zipline, a climbing wall, a bungee trampoline, and lots more to explore.

By now some of us were ready to return to our cars back in the Polar Caves parking lot in order to get home for supper, unpack, unwind, and reflect on how blessed we were to have been able to see and do so much in NH's wonderful White Mountains. Back in the 5th century, St. Augustine said; "The world is a book. And those who do not travel read only one page." So, let's travel and encourage others to travel when we can.

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