

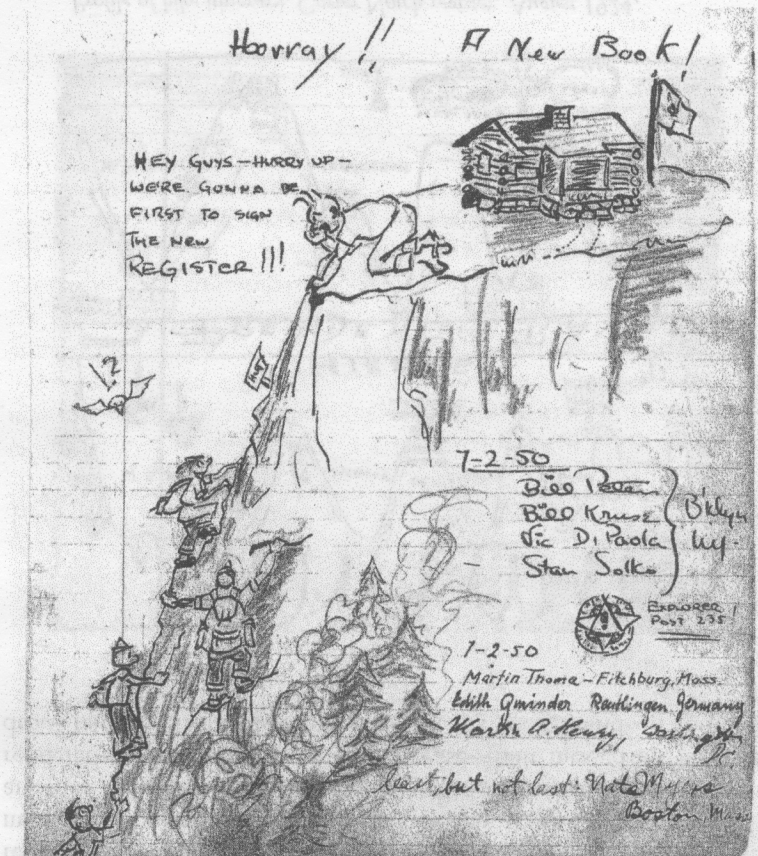
The Art of the Huts

Roger Sheffer

ON THE INSIDE COVER of the 1956 Madison Hut register, some bossy person wrote the following admonition:

This is page #2 of the new, *clean*, 1956 register. THE OFFICIAL WORD is keep the book neat and clean. Camps use one or two pages (not the whole book, I said NOT THE WHOLE BOOK). Don't write letters in the book to a friend. Yes, we have post cards and stationery for this purpose. The official word in simple words is...DON'T MESS THIS BOOK UP.

If hikers followed the rules and never messed up the register pages, there would be no trail art, trail poetry, trail jokes, tall tales—only monotonous lists of names and addresses, page after page. But the “rules” aren’t always spelled out, and the hikers go ahead anyway and make a “mess” of the registers. More in the spirit of the creative hiker/writer is the inside cover of the Galehead register from 1950, with its hikers eagerly clambering up the vertical cliff below the hut in order to be the first to sign in, as if the register itself were the main attraction. “Hooray!!” the lead hiker exclaims. “A new book!”



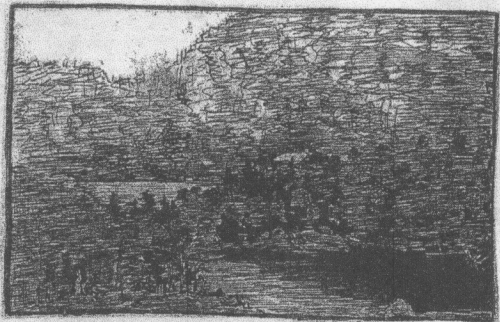
“Welcome page” from 1950 Galehead register.

For certain Appalachian Trail hikers, the register itself is the main attraction along the way. These hikers call themselves “register hounds.” I’ve met them on the trail, or seen their comments in the shelters. In 1987 a woman wrote in a Pennsylvania register, “One of my greatest fears on the Trail, especially when hiking alone, is that I will get to a shelter...and there will be *no register!* When that happens, it’s like coming home and finding your telephone ripped out of its jack, the TV gone, the radio broken, and the newspaper burned. These registers are our only means of communication in the Long

Green Tunnel, and mean more to me than any of the above ever did at home." Another hiker, writing in the register at Mizpah Spring, commented in the margin of a well-drawn page, "Who makes all these great pictures?" Good question. Sometimes the pictures are signed; more often they're anonymous, especially in more recent examples where the hiker-artists, when they bother to sign their work, use trail names, such as the "Yankee Scribbler" or "Toon."

Hundreds of registers have been archived at the AMC headquarters on Joy Street in Boston. In these books one can find trail art dating back to the 1920s. Some of this art is conventional, almost "fine art," as in a drawing from the 1926 Carter Notch register, a pen-and-ink rendering of a hut set among trees. Whether it's fine art or cartoon art, the subject is usually the landscape, the hikers, or a combination of the two in which a story of the hike is told through pictures. A very early example of this can be found in the Carter Notch register from 1923, a five-part cartoon strip entitled "Pictorial Views of trip so far," including the journey by car, a breakdown along the way, the climb to the hut, and—my favorite—a long reception line of hikers being "glad-handed by Hutmaster White." The last frame shows people tripping over each other as they run toward a well-stocked dinner table.

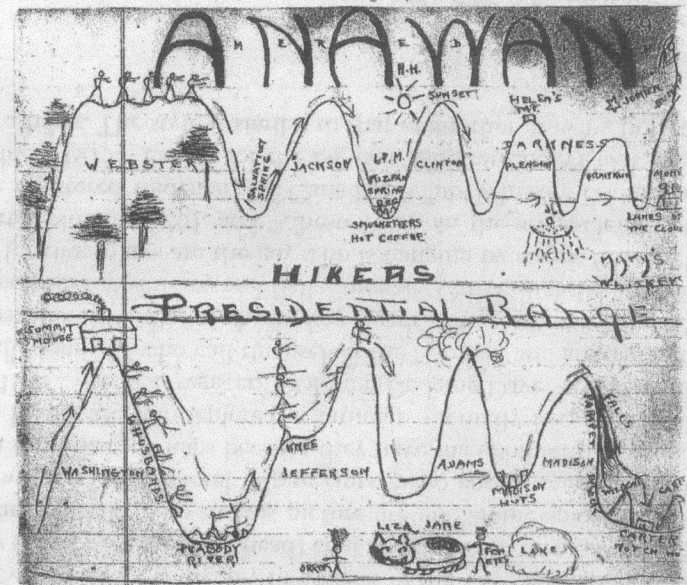
In the Carter Notch register from the following year, a hiking party is shown making its way across the page from the top of Webster and over eight additional peaks on the way to Carter Notch. At one point the stick-figure hikers seem to be tumbling from the top of Mount Washington into the Peabody River, where one figure is shown upside down, his head in the water. The style is very rough, almost a kind of folk art in its skewing of perspective and proportions, with the Summit House teetering on the pointed top of the mountain.



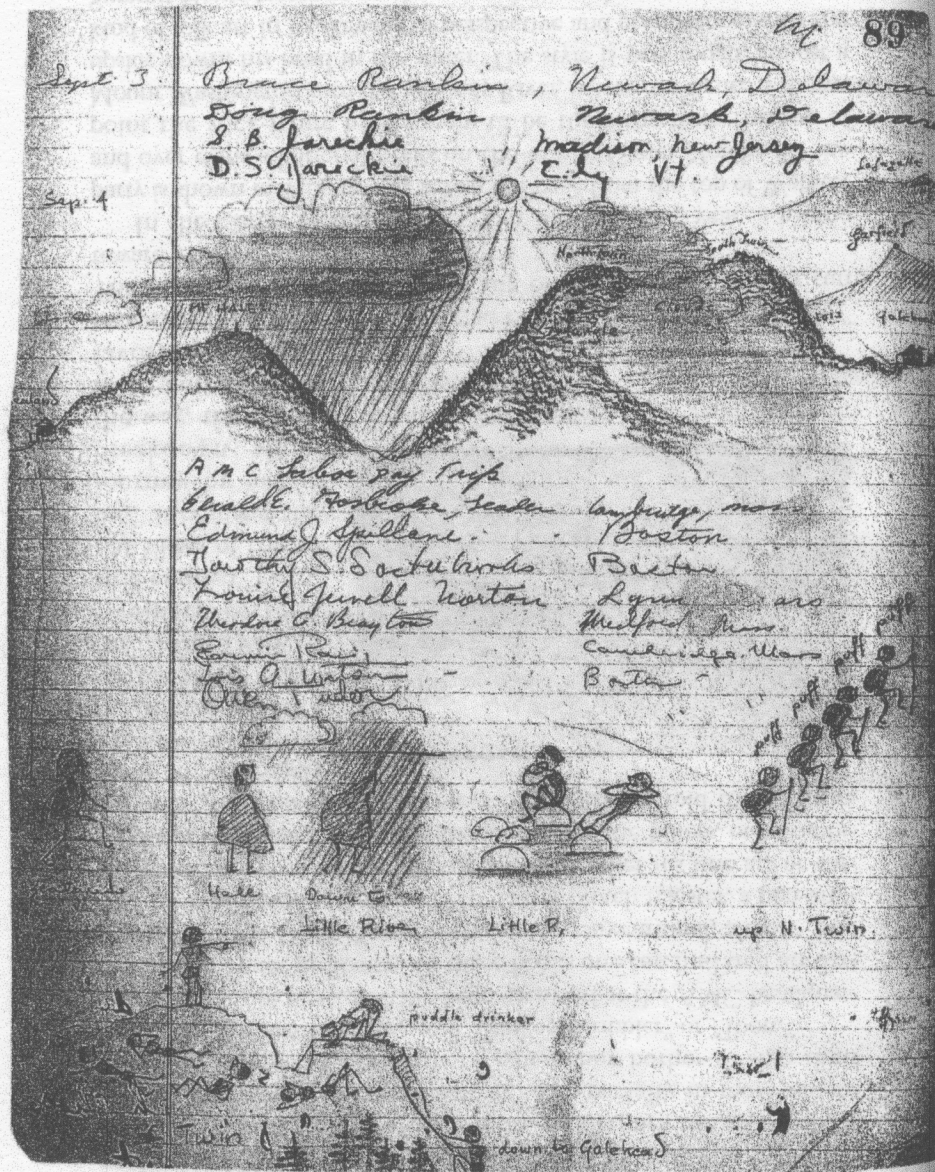
Pen-and-ink drawing from Carter Notch register, June 27, 1926.

A more recent illustrated hiking story appears in the Galehead register from 1948, picturing an AMC Labor Day trip. The more general view shows the profile of the mountains and the sequence of weather conditions encountered. Below the standard list of names and addresses, a "close-up" shows the stick-figure hikers, first at Zealand, then on Mount Hale (casting a worried glance toward the sky), then hunched over in the rain while hiking down to Little River, then basking on the rocks at Little River before heading up North Twin, to the caption of "Puff, puff, puff, puff."

The representation of the hiker as a stick figure is not just a matter of artistic convenience; it's also an expression of the hiker's physical condition, if slightly exaggerated. In a picture from the Madison register, 1978, captioned, "That's what we looked like," three young men are pictured. One clings desperately to the edge of a cliff; another is sliding down head first, yelling "Aaaaaa!" The third is rendered in more detail, standing at ease—hair messed up, a bit of drool hanging from his chin, pack on his back, hand on walking

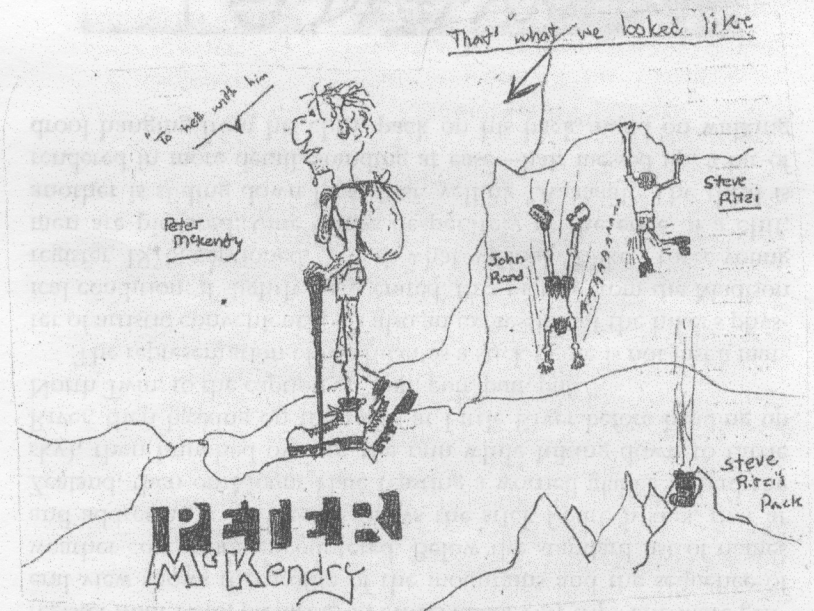


Profile of hike itinerary, Carter Notch register, August 1924.



Illustrated story of a hike, Galehead register, September 4, 1948.

stick, huge boots. The main thing one notices is this: he's bone-skinny. Even skinnier is the guy in a Lakes of the Clouds register, whose body (except for the large head) could be stuffed in one pocket of his enormous pack. Also in this picture are an "alpine spider seen on hut window" and several "alpine ants," who appear much healthier than the hiker, perhaps because they have made off with his candy. Two hikers are self-depicted as animals—actually two hutmen, in the 1948 Greenleaf register, "Doldrum Dodging Dave" and "Don the Puddle Jumper," who call themselves the "Donks" and are represented as human bodies with donkey heads. They are carrying 100-pound packs of whiskey and Ballantine ale. Other, slightly more normal looking hikers are the guy who is hanging by a rope from a cliff (Carter Notch, 1926), and "Chester," whom the artist identifies as "the registered trademark of Canadian Club Whiskey Booze, Inc., Madison 1975." Except for the big feet, Chester doesn't look much like a hiker. The style is similar to that of another drawing from the



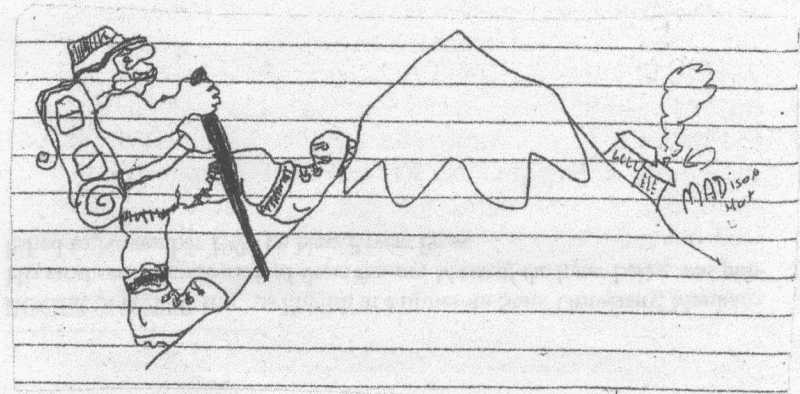
"That's what we looked like," pictures of three hikers, Madison register July 8, 1978.

same register, of a big-footed giant making his way over the ice-capped summit toward the "MADison" Hut.

To look at these old pictures is to recover the spirit of another time, the enthusiasm or fatigue of hikers most of whom are no longer living. The stick figure of "Ruth" or "Ethel," lying face down in a puddle or curled on her back, evokes a bittersweet feeling. One wonders whether she had a good time, got her second wind, ever went hiking again. Did the artist expect ever to see his or her work again, or was this a time-killer, a practice session, a gift to the mountains?

In one case that I know of, the hiking artist did get another look at his work many years later. On August 23, 1949, two young men from the Juilliard School of Music signed their names and addresses. One of them decided to get artistic: two measures of musical notes, then a stick figure with spiky hair sawing on his violin ("hottest music on Greenleaf"), and a couple of creatures to the right, labeled as "mountain rats," screaming, "Yeow!" as if in painful reaction to the music. It's fair to say that this is the only picture of animals I've seen in a register where the animal is the victim instead of the victimizer. The name of one of the musicians looked familiar to me, and his hometown was the same as my mother's. It turned out that they had the same violin teacher. We found this guy on the Internet white pages, in retirement in Arizona; the "would-be conductor from the Juilliard mill of music" enjoyed a long career as an orchestral conductor. He didn't remember drawing the picture, but did remember the hike and was grateful to have a copy of his work.

In the 1990s, hiker art has consisted mainly of "trail logos," stylized designs incorporating hikers' trail names and itineraries. Almost every thru-hiker on the Appalachian Trail will use one; some even have hand-stamps and stickers, which simplify the process of letting the rest of the hiking world know "I was here." To find a trail logo back in the 1920s is another matter, but there it is, on August 28, 1923, in the Carter Notch register, a set of playing cards spread out like a fan—four aces, with the name "Faultless 4" superimposed. One aspect of the trail logo is that it is re-used; a trail logo seen in Virginia will reappear two months later in Vermont. This is not exactly the case with the "Faultless 4," although two years later, same location, two cards from the four reappear: "The Ace of Hearts and the Ace of



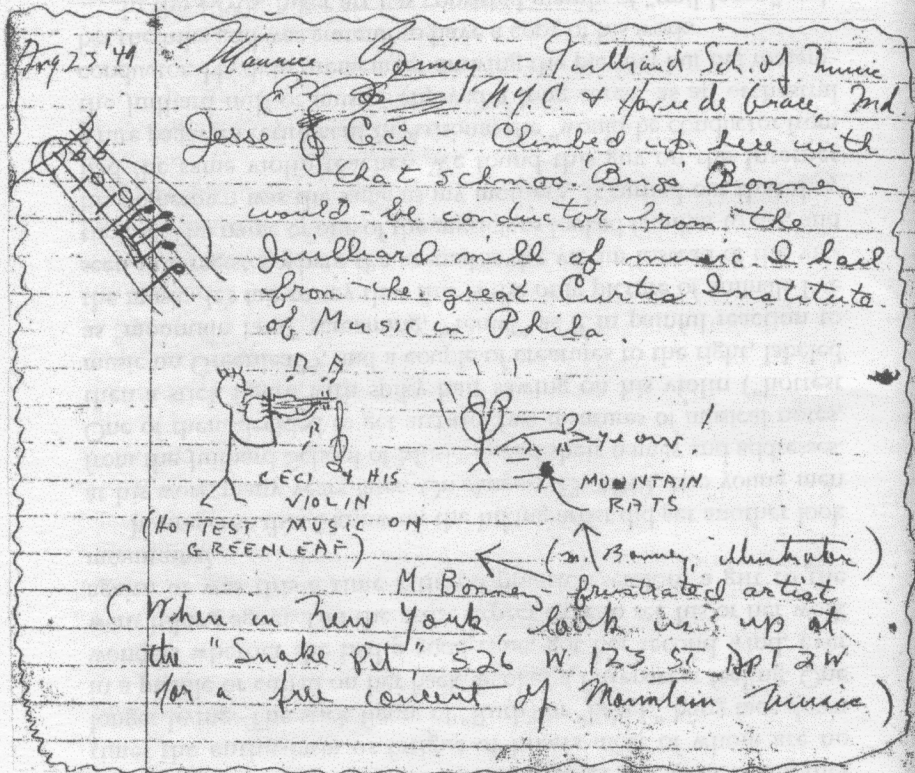
"The Giant," Madison register, June 22, 1975.

Clubs—a pair from the Faultless Four of August 28, 1923—returned to the 'slot.'"

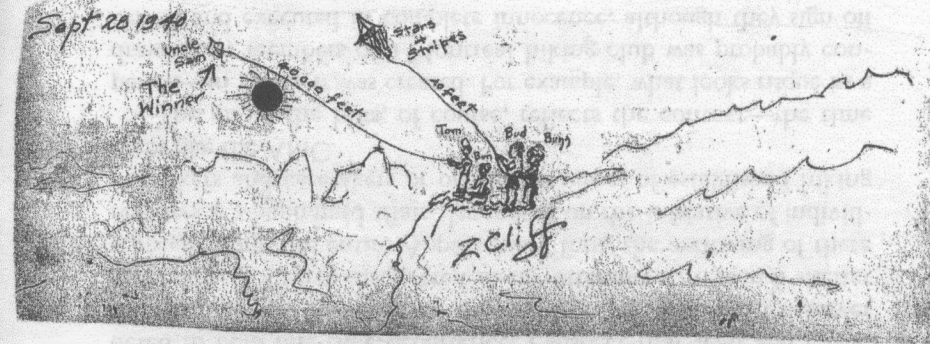
For several years during the late '40s, a creature named "Daïd Haid" would make its presence known by signing in at various huts. It was actually just an old human skull which hikers carried around with them. In the Zealand Falls register from 1949, one can find what is probably a trail logo, a picture of a dog pulling a doghouse on wheels, his tail hooked through the door and a window. The hikers' names are written on the side of the doghouse, and the slogan "hitting the road again" appears below. This artwork is too precisely rendered to be a one-time occurrence. I suspect that Jean and Clyde Brown repeated it wherever they registered, although I'll never know, for, as I have discovered in my attempts to research shelter registers along the entire Appalachian Trail, the archiving of these registers is a haphazard affair, dependent on the initiative of individual hikers and caretakers or on the resources of established hiking clubs like the AMC.

The art of the huts, of course, reflects the context—the time period—in which it was created. For example, what looks risqué in a drawing by members of a Montreal hiking club was probably conceived and executed in complete innocence, although they sign off with the phrase "10:15 P.M. and off to raise hell at the Lakes." A

drawing that shows a party standing on "Z Cliff" on September 28, 1940—Tom, Bun, Bud, and Buzz flying kites—is a reflection of that very specific time, with one kite labeled "Uncle Sam, the Winner," the other labeled "Stars and Stripes." Of course, the United States was not yet in the war. A page from just after the war has the fake signatures of Joseph Stalin, Tom Dewey, Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, and, of course, Kilroy. A page from the '80s, with detailed pictures of various types of guns (and an American flag), takes a cynical turn with its caption "Kill a Commie for Mommy." And from the



Violinist serenading mountain rats. Greenleaf register, August 23, 1949.



Flying kites from Zeacliff, Zealand Falls register, September 28, 1940.

same year, in a parody of the Janis Joplin song "Mercedes Benz," a depressed hiker, no longer able to climb the high peaks of the Presidential Range, pleads for rescue by helicopter. The page is ironic, funny, and quite touching, and not in the least bit self-serving—in the way that an actual cell-phone call for rescue would be. That particular piece of art is typical of what the register hounds long for, something that tells the truth in a much more interesting way than a simple cry for help.

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