



HOPEFUL PROSPECTS

A hiker and her father follow the family trailblazer's path uphill, in search of common ground

BY PIPPA BIDDLE

The author's father tracks blazes hung by his own dad up Mount Prospect, in southern New Hampshire.



The trailhead for Mount Prospect, in New Hampshire's Lakes Region, is innocuous, with parking for only two cars—three if you pull in nose-to-tail, tight against the maples and pines.

For all of the trailhead's subtlety, the route itself is well marked, winding over a small stream that's crossable in one large leap if the weather has been dry. The lower part of the trail gets a fair amount of traffic, as do the first few overlooks. It's not until farther up, where the trail narrows so much it seems to peter out, that the mountain begins to assert itself. At 2,024 feet, Mount Prospect may be diminutive in stature, but its upper elevations are scraggly, scrappy, and wild.

Up here is where William Whelen Biddle, an English teacher and outing club leader from 1971 to 1983 at the nearby Holderness School, would bring groups of students for afternoon hikes. And it's here, where the trail fades into fallen pine needles, we begin our search.

We—my father and me—are seeking a sign, something to direct us toward a lookout he remembers from his childhood but hasn't visited in 40 years. After a few minutes of scanning trunks, we spot it: a hammered metal triangle that, if my father recalls correctly, my grandfather William, or Bill, nailed here in the 1970s. Today Bill's vintage triangles are interspersed with newer markers: plastic circles, carefully stacked cairns, the occasional blaze painted on the trunk of a tree.

We're on this hunt thanks to me. My father's eldest daughter, I had coerced him into taking me to his 35th high school reunion at Holderness. My dad and I hadn't spent much time alone together in the last few years, but I wanted to see where Bill had worked, to talk to some of his students, and to get a look at the school's archives. While our own relationship had been strained, we'd both been very close to Bill, and I figured the outing might do us some good. Plus, I couldn't just show up to the reunion on my own.



My dad agreed, on the condition that we spend the night on the mountain. At the time, I had never heard of Mount Prospect and didn't know of its significance for my father or grandfather. I also didn't realize how far the terms of our deal were tipped in my favor. Over the course of the five-hour drive from my parents' home, outside New York City, it became clear that my farther was steeling himself for the visit.

Holderness, a boarding and day school in the heart of New Hampshire, had been both his alma mater and his home. His childhood address was a mailbox on campus, and his morning commute had followed the low fence that still borders an athletic field. But ever since Bill passed away in 2012, my dad's fond memories of the place had been superseded by thoughts of his father.

My dad hadn't been back to campus since, in part because he knew how many questions would be waiting for him when he returned. How was he holding up? Had Bill gone easily? And then, he predicted—correctly, it turns out—the string of well-meaning former students and faculty members who would launch into unprompted stories of how Bill had shaped their lives: *"He taught me how to be comfortable in the woods."* *"He showed me how to think critically."* *"Remember when he took a bunch of us on a summit push on New Year's? Such an adventure, but so cold!"*

That one, at least, would garner a chuckle. It was typical Bill. Pick the most miserable day of the year and the most difficult trail in the region and then hustle a pack of youngsters to the top. Bill's strategy behind such trips was simple. The chance of sharing the trail is lowest when the weather is toughest. Even if it means rerouting miles out of the way, an empty trail is the path to a pivotal, if elusive, sense of discovery.

All of this fascinated me after Bill passed away, just as my father was ready to stop talking about it for a while.

Bill was born in 1930 in Philadelphia. A graduate of Dartmouth and president of its outing club, he taught counterintelligence for the U.S. Army in Japan and received a master's in education from Harvard.



This spread, from far left: Bill on a Holderness School outing; Prospect and environs; Bill, the author (front), and her sisters on Lake Temagami in 2006.

Married, eventually with four kids, he taught in Massachusetts and Illinois before landing at Holderness and, later, Seattle. Throughout his life, his zeal for the outdoors never faded. He worked for the National Park Service, coached Nordic skiing, served as an Oregon Trail re-enactor, and led paddling trips in hand-built canoes.

My clearest memories of my grandfather are of him guiding my family's annual canoe excursions on Lake Temagami, in the northern reaches of Ontario. He would weave tales that transformed even the swampiest hidden lake into a wondrous land of beaver, bear, and moose. Back safe in our cabin, illuminated by gas lanterns and warmed by a wood-burning stove, he'd tell us tales of his time working on the same lake as a young man.

For my sisters and I, Bill was our preacher and *Paddle to the Sea* our Bible. But for all of the detail with which he painted the outdoor world, I realized after Bill's death that I barely knew him as a person. I never heard about his service in Japan or what he considered the defining characteristics of the perfect ax head. I never got to share a toast with him over his favorite drink: bourbon, served fireside in a sawed-off soda can. He never told me how he joined AMC in 1955, nor how he was recommended—at the time, a requirement for admission—by Preston H. Saunders, a two-term AMC president.

I was left trying to pick up his trail on my own. Over time, I discovered more than a dozen articles, reviews, and other tidbits he contributed to AMC publications between 1955 and the mid-70s. I read his travel journals and pored over old pictures from the summits of Mount Washington and Katahdin. I tracked down and interviewed his former students, friends, and colleagues, and I read his report of a 1961 trip down the Allagash River.

And so I found myself mourning through obsession. Every article, image, and interview served as a blaze, leading me on to the next.

ON BILL'S TRAIL

Author's note: This article was made possible with the help of the AMC Library & Archives, a resource tying our present to our past. To learn more, visit [outdoors.org/library](https://www.outdoors.org/library). The following excerpt comes from a 1958 trip report, one of many Bill Biddle wrote for AMC's journal, Appalachia.

On the weekend of February 1–2, the first AMC mountain-leadership trip attempted to climb one of the northern peaks of the Presidential Range. Although we failed to reach our goal, we count the trip as a success in teaching us much about winter traveling and climbing during a period of unusually rigorous conditions in the mountains.

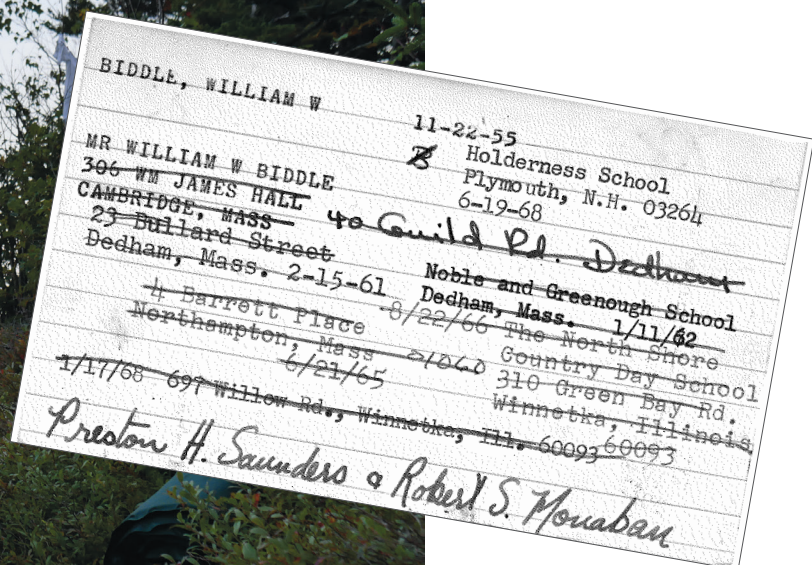
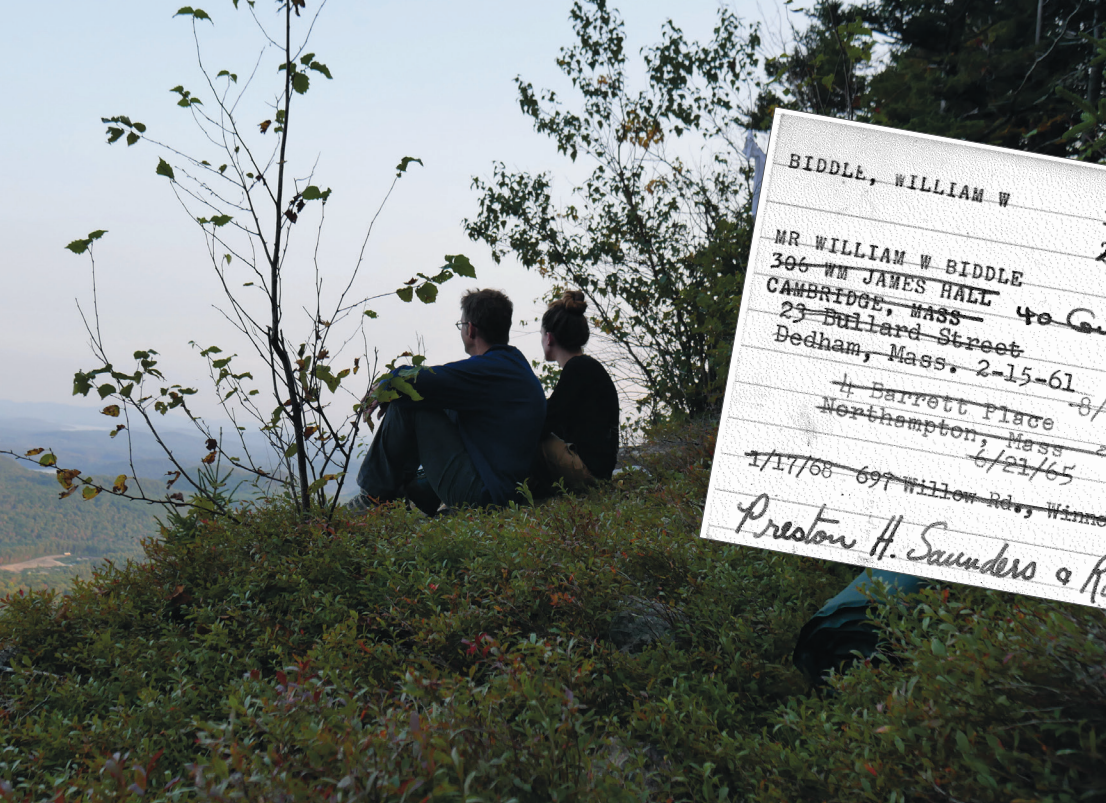
Our goal was Mt. Adams via Crag Camp by the direct route—with no frills like King Ravine.... The weather on Saturday was clear and moderately cold. A large coastal storm had just brushed Boston the night before, but the temperatures up north were no lower than 15 to 20 degrees, depending upon elevation. The summits were of course colder, but still not intolerably cold or windy....

No sooner had we hit the woods than we began to see our difficulties. Our beavertail snowshoes were excellent for breaking trail, but for crossing log bridges covered with 4 feet of snow, all snowshoes are far from admirable. The bridge took us 15 minutes, but after that, along the Amphibrach, we moved well. At about the 2,800-foot level, however, our troubles multiplied fast....

At this point, the snow was so deep and the trees so bent over with the weight of snow on them that trail-finding was our major difficulty. It was not late—between 12 and 1. After trudging on for an hour, with a stop for lunch, we met our impasse. After crossing a brook at roughly 3,000 feet, the trail begins to climb moderately. Although the grade here is nothing like the steep climb on the final pitch up to Crag Camp, it was impossible to negotiate even this. The powder snow offered no footing for snowshoes and no leverage for our ski poles. Furthermore, at this point the trail was indiscernible. The snow depth must have been at least 8 feet....

We learned a lot that night about camping in the woods. It was a most successful experience, even though we never did get up the mountain. The bivouac taught us much about cooking, on 6 to 8 feet of snow, over an open fire (two needles for the Primus broke, the second one inside the snout), about proper utilization of firewood, and many other fundamental points. First and foremost, though, we learned how wise it was on a winter climb to bring just that little bit more. You may never need it, but if you do and haven't got it, your situation might be more than just embarrassing. But the main thing we learned was Sense First; Never-Say-Die last."

—William W. Beedle



From a lookout high on Mount Prospect, Ed and Pippa contemplate Bill, whose AMC membership card is pictured above.

If you follow the markers up Mount Prospect, you'll eventually come to a clearing that leads to an even narrower path. After a few yards, this opens up to the vista my father remembers from his childhood.

We pick our way through the crispy blueberry bushes to a bare, flat rock the size of a bistro table. My father swings off the Bill-era external frame pack he has insisted on carrying, leaving newer and more comfortable options at home. Propping the pack against a tree, he pulls out dinner: hard salami, crackers, sweaty cheese, some almonds unimproved by their proximity to said sweaty cheese, canned sardines, and a pocketknife. Bill's favorites.

As we eat, we watch a waxing gibbous moon in shared silence, adding layers of clothing as the air cools. I try to start a conversation a few times, but my prompts go unanswered as my father retreats inward. In the quiet, I accept that we are here primarily for contemplation.

Over the course of the night, the temperature drops into the low 30s, and it's not until after a conversation between coyotes awakens me in the wee hours that I realize I haven't been this physically close to my father in years. Neither of us has been solely at fault. When he reached out, I pushed back. And when I tried, he wasn't sure how best to reciprocate. I went to boarding school, and it was easier—for me, at least—to love him from a distance. Now, packed tight in a two-person tent, the space that has surrounded us like bumpers for more than a decade is gone.

I'm not comfortable, being so close, but I am com-

forted. I miss Bill. He misses Bill. Together, I believe, we miss Bill a little less. In the morning, we watch as the fog burns off Squam Lake, unveiling the Pemigewasset River Valley below, the Squam Range above, and the rows of rounded peaks that extend like ripples in the mugs of tea we brew on our camp stove.

Places, I'm learning, can be passed down like a genetic trait. They can be traced and tracked, forging a heredity path. They can skip over a generation or peter out entirely, only to come back without expectation nor warning. The thread that binds your life to a place is spun not from happenstance but from circumstance and story.

I wasn't able to experience Mount Prospect with the man who helped blaze its trail, but the mountain was passed down to me nonetheless, as were my blue eyes, my short waist, and my love of Lake Temagami. Bill shared Mount Prospect with my father. My father, 40 years later, has passed that love on to me, and now we have the shared experience of reliving a loved one's experience.

We hike back to the car, drive to the Holderness campus, and sneak into the dining room in time for breakfast. We discuss our plan for the day: another bowl of cereal for me and a cup of coffee for him, a five-hour drive south, a couple of showers, and then again, distance—although, now, a little less. •

Pippa Biddle's writing has appeared in Guernica, The Atlantic, and BBC Travel. An avid skier, hiker, and AMC member, she lives in New York.

ONLINE

Build an outdoor legacy by signing up for a trail-maintenance trip at [outdoors.org/volunteer2018](https://www.outdoors.org/volunteer2018) or start your teen down his or her own path this summer; details at [outdoors.org/teentrails18](https://www.outdoors.org/teentrails18).