

A collection of stories exploring a diverse array of experiences and emotions: from the joy of a snow day in New England to the unexpected unfolding of a life, from the beaches of Nantucket to the mountains of California.

Signposts and Junctions

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## **Signposts and Junctions**

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ISBN 978-1-60145-808-7

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2009

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## **On the Garfield Ridge with Jack Kerouac**

Sam Greene called from his home in New Hampshire the other night, and it did my spirit good to hear his voice again. He had moved with his wife and daughter from the shadow of Monadnock down to a new home in the Connecticut River Valley, a little north of Hanover, the home of Dartmouth College. I had first met Sam in the early 1980s when I was 32 or 33 years of age, and although Sam was 10 years younger, we became friends and shared many adventures over the years. This evening, in July of 2008, Sam was now 48 and I was nearing 60, and we were two old friends catching up on times gone by and on new developments in our lives.

Sam had called to chime in with his opinion regarding the answer to the 'Riddle of New Hampshire'. Following that, we revisited some camping and climbing trips from our days in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We chatted briefly about work, and about how each of us was faring in the new cruelty of the present day economy. Sam told me that he had climbed Mt Moosilauke two weeks ago with his young daughter and I listened to him enviously as he described their hike to the summit, a summit I had visited some twenty times over the years. Sam also informed me that he had taken a new and updated photo that was similar in composition to his "Jack Kerouac" picture, a photograph taken by a mutual friend, Bob Herman, back in the mid 1980s. In the original picture, Sam sat captured in a black and white moment in time, sitting at a table at home smoking a cigarette. Sam wore a pair of sunglasses in that photo, and I liked to say that Bob had captured his "Jack Kerouac" persona: hip, happening, assured. After talking for thirty minutes or so, we said our goodbyes, and Sam promised to send me a copy of the new photo.

After the call with Sam had ended, I sat back and, over a martini, let my mind drift back across the years to revisit one singular trip that

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Sam and I had undertaken together.

It was 1986 or '87, and we had reserved two nights lodging in two of the high huts of the White Mountains, Friday night at Greenleaf Hut and Saturday night at Galehead Hut. We planned to park at the Falling Waters trailhead in Franconia Notch, hike the trail up to the summit of Little Haystack and its terminus at the Franconia Ridge Trail, and then enjoy some of the best hiking in America. The Franconia Ridge Trail led north along the crest of the ridge and over Mt Lincoln to reach the top of Mt Lafayette, the great summit of the Franconia area. From the summit of Lafayette, a mile-long descent to the west, with Franconia Notch yawning below us, would bring us to where Greenleaf Hut sat at treeline on a shoulder of the mountain; there we would find dinner and a bunk. The next day, after breakfast, we would climb back to the summit of Lafayette and hike north along the Garfield Ridge Trail, traveling over the open summit of Mt Garfield and across the rough and jumbled trail-way of the Garfield Ridge; finally arriving at Galehead Hut. On the third day, we would descend towards Twin Mountain and hitchhike back to Franconia Notch and our car.

On the last Wednesday before the trip, an emergency at work forced my boss to cancel the vacation day I had scheduled for that Friday. Reluctantly, I called Sam and gave him the news. I suggested he continue on the original plan and hike into Greenleaf alone over the Franconia Ridge; I would drive up north after work and hike up in the dark, if need be, and meet him at Greenleaf Hut. That way, at least, we could salvage a good portion of the trip together and he could enjoy the splendor of the hike across the exposed ridge that led over the summits of Lincoln and Lafayette.

Work crawled by on that Friday, and as soon as the workday ended, a little past 4:00pm, I was in my truck and heading north. It was after 6:00pm by the time I drove into Franconia Notch and changed into my hiking clothes. I started up the Old Bridle Path, going slow to stretch out and work myself into the effort to come. Near the

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halfway point, the trail took a hard left and soon was heading up through the scrub and rocks that covered the steep ridge leading to the hut, with Franconia Ridge towering above me on the right. I made my way up to the base of a rocky chimney and climbed over the rocks slowly in the growing darkness. In two and a half hours, I rose up out of the scrub to see my first glimpse of the hut, up close and directly in front of me.

I registered with the hut's crewmembers (the croo). Even though dinner was long over, they were kind enough to provide me with a sandwich. I put my pack on the last unclaimed bunk, one right at floor level, and changed into some dry clothes before heading outside to look for Sam.

I soon found him and we sat down together on a rock as I enjoyed my sandwich in the dark with a glass of red wine. We talked and smoked a cigar over a drink, marveling at the black ridgeline above us that was sharp against the star-filled sky, and enjoying the wonderful atmosphere of the mountains at night. He told me the details of his hike in this morning over the Franconia Ridge and the two great summits. The sounds from the hut grew softer, and then ceased altogether. As was usually the case, we were the last ones to come into the hut for sleep.

I used my small flashlight to find my bunk, only to discover that someone had swiped my blankets. Not only that, but they spilled some of my personal gear out into the walkway when they pulled the blankets off the mattress. How rude, all one had to do was ask a croo member for another. I walked over to the croo's quarters, and they provided me with two wool blankets for the night. Rising early in the morning, I saw a woman lying on a nearby bunk piled high with blankets. I was tempted to comment, but I put my sword away and bit my tongue, then went outside for some air.

After breakfast, Sam and I began the climb of the long mile up to the 5250' summit of Mt Lafayette. Leaving the scrub, we worked

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our way up the exposed flank of the mountain, enjoying every step and changing perspective. Gaining the summit, we dropped our packs and enjoyed one of the premier views in the White Mountains. Looking at the ridge arcing off to the east, I could guess where Galehead Hut lay hidden on the ridge below South Twin, some seven miles away by trail. To the north stood the rocky hump of North Lafayette, and off in the center of the ridge stood the distinctive shape of Garfield, with its rocky summit clear in the morning air.

We started down the trail past North Lafayette and worked our way down into the scrub once again. This was wild and wonderful country for walking, and as far as my history of hiking in the area was concerned, not often visited. We reached the low-point of this stretch and began a gradual climb up towards Mt Garfield, which now towered directly in front of us. We passed to the south of Garfield Pond and soon began climbing up the rocky trail in earnest. Eventually, we reached the exposed summit and dropped our gear.

We ate a lunch of hard salami and cheese on Portuguese rolls slathered with hot mustard, and enjoyed them with pickles and potato chips. We drank our fill, as we knew that the ever-reliable Garfield Spring was close down the east side of the pyramid that was Garfield. Looking to the south, the great swath of the Pemigewasset Wilderness spread out below us. The Franconia Ridge rose above us to the west, and to the east, the long north-to-south ridge formed by the Twin Mountains, Guyot, and the peaks around Mt Bond, stretched above us on our left. It was hot now in the noonday sun, and we enjoyed a snooze as we rested on the summit. Then we stood up, shouldered our gear, and started down the steep eastern side of Garfield with Galehead Hut visible now in the distance of the ridge.

We took the side-path that led to the spring, located just before Garfield Shelter. We drank as much as we could hold and filled up all of our water bottles. Then we returned to the main trail and

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continued steeply down the rocky trail to reach the base of the mountain. From there, it was a sweaty, hot, and hard effort as we negotiated the rocks, roots, and the many ascents and descents that comprised this stretch of the Garfield Ridge Trail. We reached the hut a little before 4:00pm. We dropped our gear on a bunk, put on dry clothes, and hung the clothes we had worn on the hike, now soaking wet and dripping with sweat, on a rope-line strung behind the hut for that purpose. Then we retired to the shade to rest and talk, and to enjoy the experience of being at Galehead Hut.

It had been an enjoyable hike and the hours flew by in the enjoyment of each other's company, and in our love and appreciation for the mountains of New Hampshire. The following morning, we hiked down to the road and hitchhiked back to our cars in Franconia Notch. All too soon, the great adventure was over.

That trip was long ago. Today, in July of 2008, the original old black and white "Jack Kerouac" picture of Sam, sits on a shelf in my house in northern California. Bob Herman took that photo over twenty years ago in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire. In that photo, the young Sam Greene, wearing sunglasses, sits in the evening at his kitchen table with a Scotch on the rocks before him, holding a cigarette in one hand, and looks at the photographer with an air of confidence and cool self-assurance. The timeless summer breeze comes in through the curtains on the left, lifting them with a wind that carries the names and memories of all the friends who made those days in the shadow of Mt Monadnock so special, people who shared the hopes and dreams that were a part of those years in New Hampshire. Within that black and white photograph of Sam, I see the faces of us all merged together into one image, captured in the eternal summer of youth.

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