



THORNTON GORE: THE GHOST TOWN NEXT DOOR

My mother spent her childhood in the mining town of Gilman, Colorado. It's now a ghost town, but the little white wooden houses still stand, spilling down the steep side of Battle Mountain, clearly visible from Highway 24 in the valley below. I always thought of ghost towns like that — brave, lonely places you can see from a distance and hike up to, with houses still holding visible remnants of the lives lived in them. In Gilman, you can find papers on the floor of the mining engineer's office and tea cups in the front room of the house next door.

I never pictured ghost towns in the White Mountains. When houses are abandoned here, they disappear quickly. Even stone foundations are covered by moss within months and the thick, deciduous forest hides everything — metal wheels, old tools, crumbling walls. Human history here is all around us, but hard to see. Waterville Valley has a ghost town right next door, just off Tripoli Road, southeast of Russell Pond. Thornton Gore was a farming community occupying the sharp “gore” or triangle of land forming the northern boundary of Thornton. Its first settlers arrived in 1804. Over the years, the community grew and gradually added a school, post office, and church.



I set out to visit it on a late summer day. The old road that connected the farms is still visible as a wide, gated path a few hundred yards before you reach the ranger station. As I walked downhill toward Eastman Brook, I passed stone walls and remnants of cellar holes, an apple orchard, and then an old cemetery. The smallest stone marks the grave of the “infant sons of Augustus and Clara Merrill.” The babies died in 1875 and 1876, but they are alone — the graves of their parents are not with them. The young couple must have left Thornton Gore, I thought, as I continued down the path.

Life was not easy in this little farming village, even though the hard work of the residents did pay off for a time, first in potato farming, then cattle production and sheep for wool sold to textile mills. Next to the brook and a cascade, there is a set of metal gears precariously balanced over the remains of a sluice — works of one of the several mills that were built in the town before it was finally abandoned in the early 1900s. As the lumber companies moved in, empty houses were torn down or left to decay so that the area could be retimbered as quickly as possible.



When I got home I searched the web for traces of Augustus and Clara Merrill. They did leave Thornton Gore soon after the death of their second baby, and got as far as Concord, where they had at least one more child, who survived. Augustus and Clara died in 1915 and 1917 and are buried in Tilton, having lived to the ripe old ages of 70 and 63.

For more on Thornton Gore and other abandoned towns of the period, see http://whitemountainhistory.org/Thornton_Gore.html.

Beth Goldsmith is a writer who has been coming to the White Mountains to ski, hike, and camp since her teenage years and has been a part-time resident of Waterville Valley for twenty years. Since retiring from her career as a professor of French literature she has been spending more and more time up here. She may never leave.