



A MOUNTAIN SUMMER – 1919

In 1919, a young woman named Elsie Ford spent the summer season working as a waitress at the Elliott Hotel in Waterville, New Hampshire. She was 18, glad to have the job, and hoping to have some free time for outdoor adventure. Elsie's mother, too, must have been relieved that her daughter had found work in a mountain town. Elsie's sister, Gertrude, suffered from tuberculosis and was to move to the newly opened sanatorium in Hanson, Massachusetts that same summer. Elsie was eager to entertain her sister with letters home. She wrote long reports, filling the margins with drawings of herself, the people she met, and her impressions of the landscape. In one letter, she illustrates the challenge of learning how to carry big serving trays on her shoulder: "You ought to see us now. We have to carry our trays in style – wow. . . . It's some job to get it balanced but you can rest it on your shoulder so it's quite easy after you get started."

She was happy to discover that she would have time to explore. ("Only at meal times we scuttle around. We have no chamber work as they have in some places. All the other time we have to ourselves.") She ran up to the Cascades as soon as she could, and describes the sight with poetic enthusiasm: "We went to the cascades the other day. It is WONDERFUL there. The river rushes down headlong, without noticing where it runs – stubs its toes and over it goes in a mass of foam and spray into rocky bowls and paths."

On one lucky day, she and her friend Kathryn managed to persuade the head waitress to give them time off for a climb up Mt. Osceola. ("Miss Mahony was rather astounded but SHE AGREED!") This was a real adventure, and not an easy one even though they were prepared: "We started off in fine style with a borrowed wrist watch, drinking cup, and bloomers, a bag of lunch strapped to my patent leather belt. . . .". They found the going hard ("Think of climbing an uneven rough staircase to the moon!"), but exhilarating ("I would set my eye on another rock, drag my weary limbs a little further. Oh! Strange as it may seem, it was enjoyment exquisite – wonderful. Surmounting all difficulties, going up.") Reading her description of how she discovered her own strength, it's easy to think that she must have been hoping to communicate some of it to her sister: "I never knew I was stronger or had MORE ENDURANCE than Kathryn. Perhaps it's because I found a way to do it. I let myself go just as slow without the least hurry or flurry, a step at a time, no worry, and I could KEEP my wind. You know about those stores of hidden strength that come when need be. They come in handy."

Near the summit, they ran into a group of guests from the hotel who had also been making the climb. The young men were quite taken aback: "They talked a little and I suppose if K and I were flirts we could have gotten acquainted. They seemed rather surprised to see us. I s'pose they think that girls (there are some wonderful specimens of climbers here) have to be escorted by boys to be helped over bridges etc. Pooh!"

Elsie and Kathryn lingered at the fire tower and the cabin of the fire warden named Guy ("He is very interesting. Very, very thin and wiry – brown as a nut."). Guy showed them the views and told them stories of his solitary life on the mountain. The girls had seen him before, when he stopped at the hotel on his weekly trips back to Plymouth, and noted then that he never spoke a word. But on his own turf he was so talkative that they had to interrupt his stories in order to leave in time.

Clearly, Gertrude appreciated her sister's letters. She saved them. Eventually (perhaps when Gertrude died?) they were returned to Elsie, who kept them until she died at the age of 75. In 2001, they were donated to the town of Waterville Valley by a thoughtful person who had known Elsie in her later years. They are now stored in the archive managed by the Waterville Valley Historical Society.

Stay tuned for more from Elsie Ford!

