



August Entertainment

As we arrive at the end of what may have been the rainiest July in Waterville Valley history, I've been thinking about some of the people I've encountered in my readings of old correspondences from the early days of tourism here. They loved to write about their favorite hikes, trips to landmarks in the area, advice on what to wear and where to stay on expeditions in the White Mountains. But what did they do when the weather was uncooperative? They don't write much about that, but some of them tell us quite a bit about the entertainment that was an important part of their season schedule, regardless of weather.

Harry Fabyan, a prominent figure in the civic life of Waterville in the early 20th Century, and who is notable for his significant contributions to acquiring Waterville land for the National Forest, owned one of the original cottages here where he and his wife spent vacations from his work as a judge in Boston. This eminent personage seems to have known something about work-life balance. A letter written to him on May 27, 1938, calls on him to address the serious business of planning the August entertainment schedule for visitors to Waterville. The idea was to model it on a popular variety show, the Major Bowes Amateur Hour. The show had launched the career of 19-year-old Frank Sinatra in 1935, when he performed on it as a member of The Hoboken Four (see photo at right). Waterville had a beloved summer resident known for his singing voice, Parker Seeley who, it was decided, would be featured as part of a singing quartet in the season's entertainment. Macy Wheeler, the organizer of the events, wrote from his desk at The First National Bank and Trust Company of Bridgeport:



My dear Judge Fabyan,

We are getting near to the Waterville season and therefore I am trying to unearth some amusing things for the entertainment of the 15-85-year oldsters during the height of the August season.

Jeannie Noyes and I have been working on a plan to put across a radio program such as Major Bowes and his amateurs. We plan to write the whole thing up so that no one has to remember anything. We have in mind a singing duet by Ted Tucker and Dick Gallagher,

some song or crazy rendering of a well-known poem by Mrs. Austin who will serve as the hometown representative, a memory feat by Jeanie Noyes, a fake organ recital by Ibbie and Midge, a hill-billy songfest by Ed Lorenz and his gang, a tap dance by Rog, and imitations of some well-known radio star by Ted Tucker who is quite good at this sort of thing, a pantomime of Jonah and the Whale by myself, Jake Stafford and his own Charlie McCarthy, animal calls with impossible sounding names (which we have made up) by Bill Reid, and the closing amateurs will be a quartet composed of Messrs. Tucker, Salinger, Badger and Seeley.

And he goes on.

This is quite an ambitious amateur hour! Of course, the key figure was to be Judge Fabyan playing the role of the host, Major Bowes. For readers who may not have heard of this enormously popular media figure of the 1930s, check out a recording of one of his programs on YouTube. Mr. Fabyan must have been both flattered and dubious about being chosen by the entertainment committee as the unanimous favorite to take on the job of host. Mr. Wheeler closes his letter with the simple plea: "I hope we can count on you since the other possibilities would not be so good."

Judge Fabyan's response has not been preserved for posterity, but we may assume that he accepted, and visitors to Waterville in August of 1938 were happily entertained, rain or shine.

Anyone interested in organizing a reenactment of the event for a rainy evening in August 2021?

SOURCE: Macy Wheeler's letter to Harry Fabyan is in the Waterville Valley Collection, Rauner Library, Dartmouth College.



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