



TRIPOLI ROAD—QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



When I first started coming to Waterville Valley about 20 years ago, I was following a map that took me meandering from Route 93, up to the valley and back down again, following Tripoli Road. I was struck by two things: how beautiful the little valley was, as it opened up over the rim of Route 49, and how long the dirt and gravel road was, getting back down to Route 93 on the other side. Curious about this bumpy detour, I asked a couple of locals about its history, and received the first of many corrections to my misperceptions: Tripoli is not named after a city on the Barbary Coast; it refers to a mineral — tripoli, a diatomaceous earth — that was mined, from 1911 to 1919, out of East Pond. What is this mineral? It is an abrasive that was used in metallurgy, woodworking, jewelry polishing, and even toothpaste (ouch). The west end of Tripoli Road was initially built to transport equipment through Thornton Gap to the Livermore-Tripoli Mill. Today I think it's a good cross-country ski season when I don't have to go up the Tripoli Road trail in order to find decent snow conditions. Not long after the road was added to the trail system, I passed a small truck that had gotten stuck in the snow on the side. The driver apparently suffered from an over-reliance on Google for directions, and had believed that the road should be passable in December despite all visual evidence to the contrary. In the winter, the closed road keeps Waterville Valley honest when it advertises itself as "the town at the end of the road." In 1929, when the phrase was coined by a resident making a toast at the hundredth birthday celebration of the town, there was already a sense among those who lived here that it would be just fine if no more road improvements were made to connect Waterville to Woodstock.

Nat Goodrich and David Austin had this phrase in mind when they noticed, in 1933, that a CCC camp had been established off Tripoli Road, which at that time was only drivable for the first 6 miles on the western end. The members of the Civilian Conservation Corps

had a lot of youthful energy that was being harnessed right and left to improve roads and trails in the White Mountains. This didn't make everyone happy. Austin and Goodrich consulted about how the town might block the road extension. Austin wrote: "I think the Government plan is to connect up the Waterville Valley Road with their road, which is built as far as the Tripoli mine... It seems to me that this is something that should be prevented. I thoroughly believe that the wilderness north of us should remain as it is – not for the sake of our guests or our property, but for the people in New England who enjoy that kind of territory."



As the two friends strategized about how to voice the town's objections to the road, they became more and more lyrical in their praise of leaving the valley as it was. Such rhetoric didn't carry much weight with the bureaucrats but Goodrich's letter, arguing that they needed to appeal to "the intangible side," is a pleasure to read:

The only hope is to get at the Chief Forester on the intangible side. The great charm of Albany, Thornton Gore, Waterville, Chatham lies to a large extent in the psychological effect of their being shut off from through travel – of the surprise of finding a charming place opening out with nothing beyond, so that one lingers and savors it instead of rushing on, -- of the pleasure one gets from finding that a venture into an unknown dead-end road is richly rewarded. Places on through roads lose all this.

Efforts to stop the road failed, of course, but it remains impassable half the year and the valley retains its feel of a place one does not simply 'go through'. We could still raise a glass with Harry Fabyan when he expressed the wish "May the town of Waterville always remain at the end of the road."

SOURCES: The Fabyan toast is reported in Grace H. Bean, *The Town at the End of the Road: A History of Waterville Valley* (Canaan, N.H.: Phoenix Publishing, 1983). Letters quoted are in the Waterville Valley collection, Rauner Library, Dartmouth College.

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