

TAKING A TRIP ON THE

Old Mountain Road

LEE MANCHESTER, LAKE PLACID NEWS

Route 73.

The Northwest Bay Trail.

Old Military Road, or Old Mountain Road.

All these names refer to the same highway — or to parts of it, anyway.

Whatever you call the trail, it's the very first road cut into the Adirondack wilderness, dating back to the end of the 18th century.

Almost all of it has survived into the current century, paved over and carrying diesel trucks and motorcars from the Northway to Elizabethtown, Keene, Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and beyond.

A single 8-mile stretch of that 1787 wilderness wagon track from Westport to Hopkinton was bypassed in 1858, however, when the Cascade Road was built between Keene and North Elba. One mile of that old road remains open on the North Elba side as a very, very rough dirt lane leading to several camps. About 3 miles on the Keene side also remain open, where the drive is called Alstead Hill Road.

But a 4.5-mile section of the original Adirondack roadway has been closed off to vehicular traffic. It is maintained today in pretty much the same condition it was in when pioneers first drove their ox carts into the mountains some two centuries ago.

Since 1986 the maintenance of that 4.5-mile trail, called the Old Mountain Road, has been the responsibility of the Adirondack Ski Touring Council. It's just one segment of the ASTC's huge Jack Rabbit Trail network of cross-country ski routes running between Keene, Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Paul Smiths.

But the Old Mountain Road is more than just a fine cross-country ski trail.

From late spring through early autumn, after the winter snows have

melted and the spring rains have drained into Nichols Brook, visitors can tramp Old Mountain Road by foot and have pretty much the same experience an early 19th century settler or explorer would have had on that rustic highway.

The road's history

The entire length of the road from Westport through Keene and Lake Placid to Hopkinton has been known as the Northwest Bay Trail for about 200 years, more or less. It was the very first wagon trail carved into the High Peaks region of the Adirondacks, with trail blazing started around 1787.

In 1810, after a state senator and a North Elba iron magnate petitioned the Legislature, the state started funding the overhaul of the entire road, opening up New York's own Northwest Passage from Lake Champlain to the St. Law-



rence.

One mark of the road's significance to Adirondack history is that North Country pioneer surveyor Verplanck Colvin, discoverer of the source of the Hudson on Mount Marcy, used it as one of the boundaries for his proposed High Peaks forest preserve.

Many Adirondack history buffs know the remote road as the site where journalist Anson Allen, taking the 1840 Essex County census, got into a knife fight with a she bear. The fight was memorialized in Alfred L. Donaldson's oft-quoted but wildly apocryphal "History of the Adirondacks."

Donaldson, hearing of Allen's encounter some 50 years later, did just enough digging into the circumstances to get almost everything about the story wrong. For starters, Donaldson appears to have just made up the location, saying that it occurred on a road that didn't even exist until the 1890s, calling it the "Biddlecome Road" after an 18th century Keene settler of nearly no distinction.

The Northwest Bay Trail was also called the "Old Military Road," not because it was built by the Army Corps of Engineers (it wasn't), nor because it was originally meant to facilitate troop movements (double nix), but because it allowed passage into the huge Military Tracts set aside in the Adirondacks by the state Legislature in the late 18th century for settlement by Revolutionary War veterans — an offer almost no one took up.

Mary MacKenzie, North Elba's late historian emeritus, did find documentary evidence, however, supporting the possibility that U.S. troops were moved from Lake Champlain to Lake Ontario via the Old Military Road early in 1813.

Also, local tradition in Santa Clara — about 15 miles from the northern terminus of the Westport-Hopkinton turnpike — says that graves formerly found at Jennings Clearing there were the final resting place of soldiers who died on that march. That tradition is backed by the many military relics of the period unearthed there from time to time.

The Old Mountain Road played a curious role in the life of anti-slavery guerrilla fighter John Brown, who made his final home in North Elba. According to MacKenzie, Brown "came near to freezing (today's hypothermia) while



walking home alone in mid-winter of 1850. He had hired a rig from Westport to Keene, but could find no transport 'over the mountain' for the last leg of his journey. Carrying a heavy satchel, he set off on foot. Again and again he collapsed in the snow, exhausted and half-frozen. Again and again he rallied. With a last mighty endeavor he gained the first house at North Elba, Robert Scott's, and was hauled home by ox team."

Nine years later, after Brown's fatally disastrous attempt to take over a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Va., his wife Mary brought his body back to North Elba on a wagon. Historians are not sure which route Mary Brown used for the final portion of her trek in December 1859.

The Old Mountain Road was windy, rocky and narrow, giving it the reputation of a "six miles, six hours" journey.

In 1858 work had been started on the Cascade Road, a longer and steeper but more regular route between Keene and North Elba.

Some believe that Mary Brown would almost certainly have chosen the new Cascade Road for that December journey. Others point out that no one knows whether the Cascade Road was finished by that time. Even if it was, they say, the Old Mountain Road might have been Mary Brown's first choice, just because it was familiar to her.

After the Cascade Road was com-

pleted sometime around 1860, the OMR began to be used less and less frequently.

In 1986 Jim Goodwin, then president of Keene Valley's Adirondack Trail Improvement Society, "remember(ed) driving a date to the movies in Lake Placid in the 1920s, bouncing up the Mountain Road in his Model T," according to an article in the Adirondack Daily Enterprise.

The last known attempt to motor down the Old Mountain Road was made in the 1950s, when "some young men who will remain nameless tried to drive an old Ford down the old road. The car expired ... and was abandoned." (ADE Weekender, Oct. 27, 1990)

In 1973, when the Adirondack Land Use Plan first went into effect, the 4.5-mile stretch of trail between Keene and North Elba entered the latest phase in its metamorphosis.

A unit management plan for the wilderness area along the Sentinel Range was first published in 1974. That plan made the Old Mountain Road the southern boundary of the Sentinel Wilderness area. The road was given special management consideration based on its designation by Keene township as a winter snowmobile route.

It was not long, though, before the state Department of Environmental Conservation revised the road's legal status.

State law says that when a town road is not maintained for 6 years or

more, its right-of-way reverts to the state. The state took back the Old Mountain Road, placing it entirely inside the boundaries of the Sentinel Wilderness, which moved its southern border to Cascade Road — ironically, the second time it has replaced the Old Mountain Road. As a consequence, no motor vehicles were allowed from that time forward on the OMR, including snowmobiles.

A dozen years later, the Adirondack Ski Touring Council started clearing the disused roadway in cooperation with the DEC so that the path could be used by cross-country skiers as part of the Jack Rabbit Trail.

In just the last year or two, however, a local snowmobile club has challenged the right of the DEC to keep them off the Old Mountain Road. Last

December, frustrated, a club leader pledged to force the issue with a little recreational civil disobedience.

“We’re going to ride the Old Mountain Road,” club President Jim McCulley said, “wait to be ticketed, and then we have a lawyer all lined up to sue them in federal court.”

Nothing came of the threat, though, at least not last winter.

“As it is, Old Mountain Road is an abandoned road surrounded by state land within the Forest Preserve,” concluded Tony Goodwin, ASTC executive director, “and it’s not going to be re-engineered for snowmobile use.”

Getting there

I started my hike on the Old Mountain Road last Friday from the Keene

end, and I encourage you to do the same, if for no other reason than because there’s plenty of parking there. (I’ll give some more reasons before we wrap up this article.)

If you want to get a little feel for the historic experience upon which you’re about to embark, you can take the long way around to get to the Keene trailhead. Coming out of Keene, going northwest on Route 73 toward Lake Placid from the Route 9N junction, take the first right across the bridge onto Church Street.

Church Street is another small segment of the Northwest Bay Trail that was bypassed with the construction of Cascade Road in 1858. As you drive slowly past St. Brendan’s Church and climb the narrow, old, winding path, remember that you’re riding on a road first laid out between 1787 and 1810. Look at the houses lining the road, each distinctly of another era. With each one ask yourself, “Was this there then?”

The old Northwest Bay Trail turns off Route 73 again almost as soon as it steeply rejoins the highway from Church Street, taking a right onto Alstead Hill Road. The former highway runs past the Bark Eater Inn, built around 1790, a former stagecoach stop, and continues to our trailhead about 2 miles farther down the road.

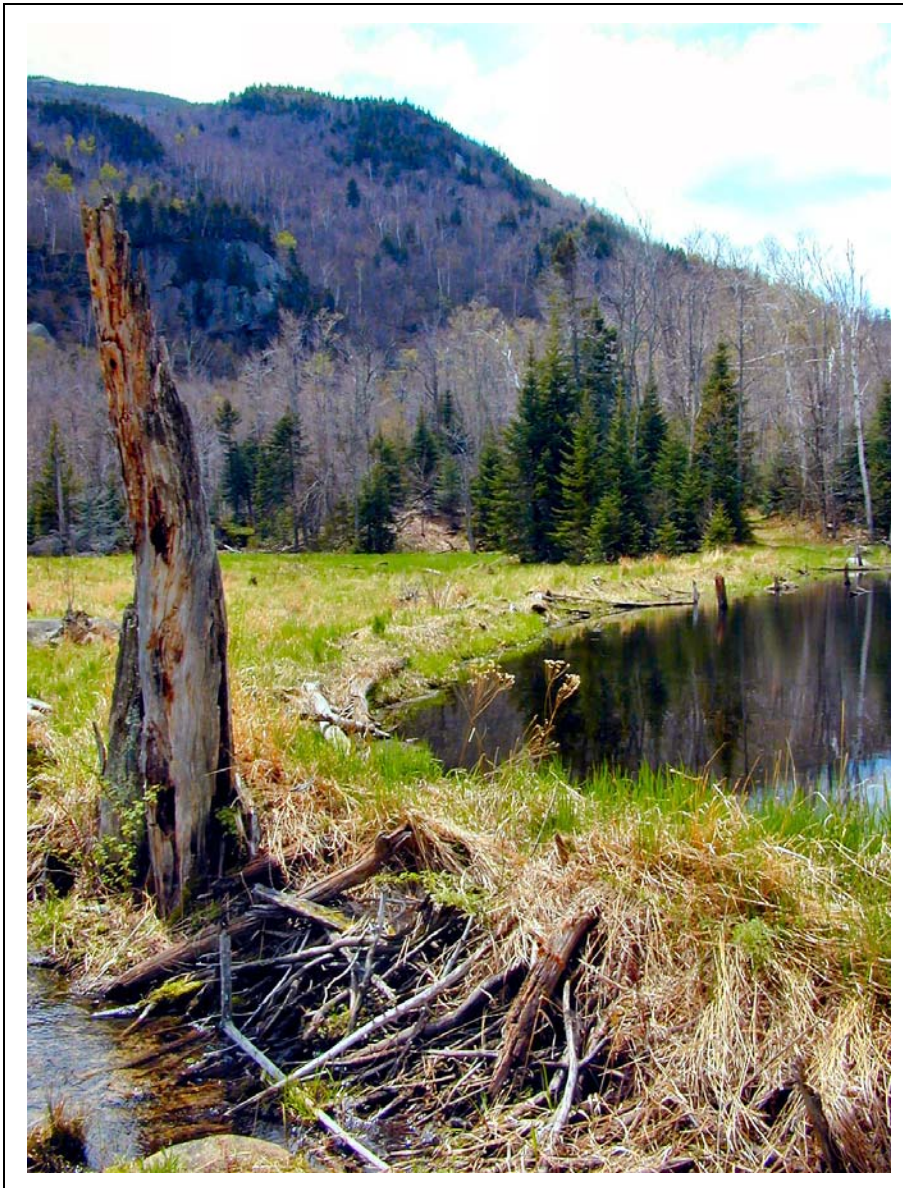
The trailhead is maintained by a private guide company, the Adirondack Rock and River Guide Service. One of the houses in the Rock and River complex dates from the early 1800s, giving the trailhead just the right atmosphere.

On the trail

The crowds may be headed to the High Peaks trails, but the Old Mountain Road is a much more solitary venue. From the trail log, it appears that very few hikers have taken to the OMR thus far this season.

The trailhead itself is quite isolated. Once you sign in and enter the Old Mountain Road, you walk into a world lit by soft, green light, its stillness broken only by bird songs, the wind in the trees, and the noise of Nichols Brook babbling along by the road.

Solitude seems to have always been a feature of this section of the Northwest Bay Trail. No one is shown on Allen’s 1840 census to have lived on the OMR past the house standing at the Keene



trailhead, and North Elba at the other end of the road was not exactly a thriving metropolis.

Today the Old Mountain Road is just as desolate. Once you enter it you'll see no more signs of human settlement than the road itself. The sounds you will hear will be not of traffic, but of the water in Nichols Brook; not of a jackhammer, but of a woodpecker; not of human voices, but of the wind.

AFTER WALKING a few hundred yards along the OMR, the question may arise: Does this look like an old wagon road, or just another hiking trail?

There are barriers preventing the entry of motorized vehicles from the Keene trailhead, so the pristine condition of the trail can only be attributed to a concerted effort to clear saplings, blowdown and other debris from the path.

The small feats of trail engineering evident along the length of the OMR — the numerous little bridges crossing stone-lined channels that carry drainage water under, rather than across, the road — also give one more of a sense of being on a carefully maintained footpath, rather than an old highway.

The width of the OMR, though, is a dead giveaway. Woodland hiking trails, after all, usually aren't cleared 6 to 8 feet across like this.

And woodland trails generally don't feature the telltale parallel tracks of a thousand pairs of oxcart wheels, the twin signatures of the 19th century ghost road, like this.

The difference between the packed and graded road leading to the trailhead, and the Old Mountain Road with its grassy median strip running between the cartwheel tracks, is clear. It's been a long, long time since anyone drove their date up this road to the movies in Lake Placid.

FOR ITS LENGTH, a hike on the Old Mountain Road is a very gentle experience. The trail starts from the Keene end with a very slight, hardly perceptible upward climb, and rarely along the path are there any steep, rocky stretches that extend very far. Nowhere on the OMR is there anything as long or as steep as the rise out of Keene hamlet past St. Brendan's on Church Street.

The first significant barrier I ran



across last Friday was a large, marshy meadow and pond created by a magnificent beaver dam. The rodent's artificially engineered environment had obliterated a 100-foot stretch of the Old Mountain Road. A herd path ran to the right along the beaver pond's northern edge, but another trail ran along the foot of the dam itself, traversable with only the slightest difficulty.

Off to the left, across the meadow, rose the bare, perpendicular, granite cliffs of Pitchoff Mountain. The long, high ridge of Pitchoff — Number 80 of the Adirondack's highest 100 peaks — stands 3,600 feet tall, watching over the entire length of the Old Mountain Road, a sheltering guardian.

BEAVER DAMS are a constant presence along — and upon — the

OMR. In the half century since the road fell into complete disuse, a colony of the flat-tailed critters has taken advantage of the ready water supply that flows along the old highway. At least a dozen dams rise along the 4.5 miles of the closed-off trail, remarkable structures, with beaver huts built on the prominences left after the water rose behind the barriers.

For the most part, the dams do not create insurmountable blocks to hikers on the Old Mountain Road. If you can't walk across them, you can walk around them — mostly.

At the very end of the road, however, less than three-quarters of a mile from the North Elba trailhead, I finally met my match. Just below a really, tremendously huge piece of Pitchoff cliff that fell, many millennia past, along what became the OMR — its relatively

flat top a good place for a picnic lunch before heading back to your car — lay a final series of beaver dams. Not only did they flood the roadbed, but their ponds stretched from one hillside on the south to the opposing hill on the north. There was very little ground along the pond's edge that looked level or open enough to scramble across, and the consistency of that ground was like a thick mud pudding.

I gave up.

Two days later, however, just to see how close I'd gotten to the road's end, I came back — and found that I was right. Those last beaver ponds are within 10 minutes' walk of the North Elba trailhead — and, if one is not too tuckered out, their edges can be navigated, provided one has worn a good pair of ankle-high waterproof boots.

And all the while that I picked my way among the exposed roots, rocks and branches that gave my only passage

around that final beaver pond, the rodent himself swam across the still waters he had created, periodically giving the surface a good, hard whack with his tail, urging me to move along and leave him be in his private, watery kingdom.

Important tips for hiking the OMR

Here are a few considerations for those of you who want to walk the Old Mountain Road:

1) Consider parking on the Keene side, at the end of Alstead Hill Road, instead of on the North Elba side. The thick woods and the rough road make the North Elba side much more isolated than the Keene side, though you'll drive farther in from Route 73 in Keene to park.

2) Don't even think about driving in from the North Elba side unless your vehicle has four-wheel drive and plenty of road clearance. This road is why God made pickup trucks and SUVs; it's a

great place for street vehicles to break an axle or get stuck in the mud.

3) Wear completely waterproof boots that tie above the ankles. If you don't, you will have difficulty traversing portions of the road if it has been raining recently — and as for scurrying through the swamps around the beaver dams, forget it.

4) Bring a good walking stick. You won't regret having lugged it along when you're hopping from rock to exposed root to fallen branch amid the thick, oozing muck that surrounds the beaver ponds.

5) Remember, it's a 4.5-mile hike, one way. Give yourself plenty of time. Dress appropriately. Bring along a lunch or a healthy snack, and plenty of water.

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