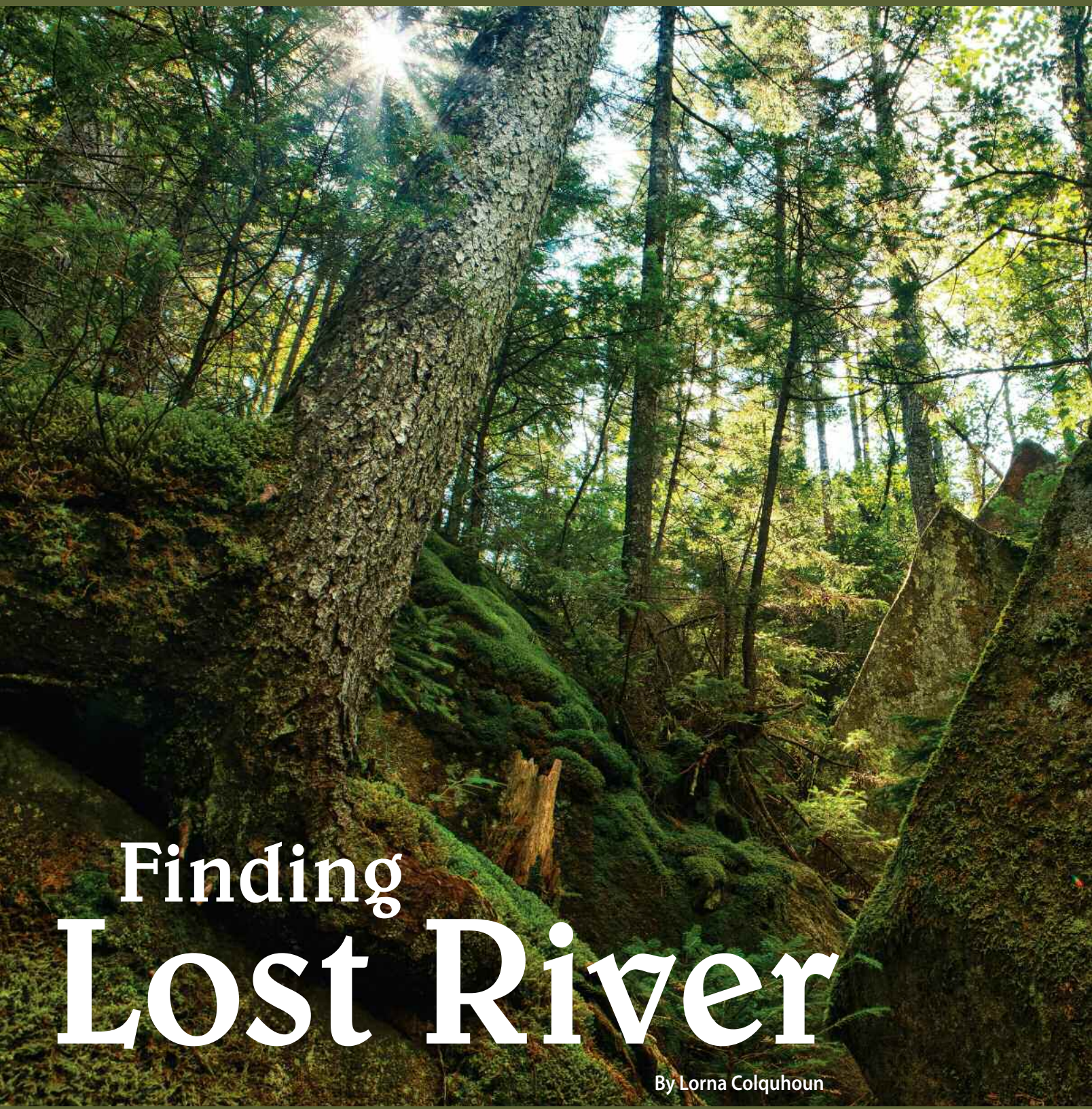


Finding Lost River

By Lorna Colquhoun

After hundreds of millions of years of being shaped by the forces of nature, the grinding stopped, the earth warmed, the Ice Age evaporated, and the last boulders in a rugged corner of New Hampshire slipped into place.

And then water began to flow, splashing over and tumbling under those enormous rocks on its way to a larger river, to be carried down to the sea.

About 25,000 years later, two curious boys would stumble upon this maze of rocks and water, proclaiming they had found Lost River, a wonder that would be rivaled only by a neighboring rock formation on the other side of the ridge.

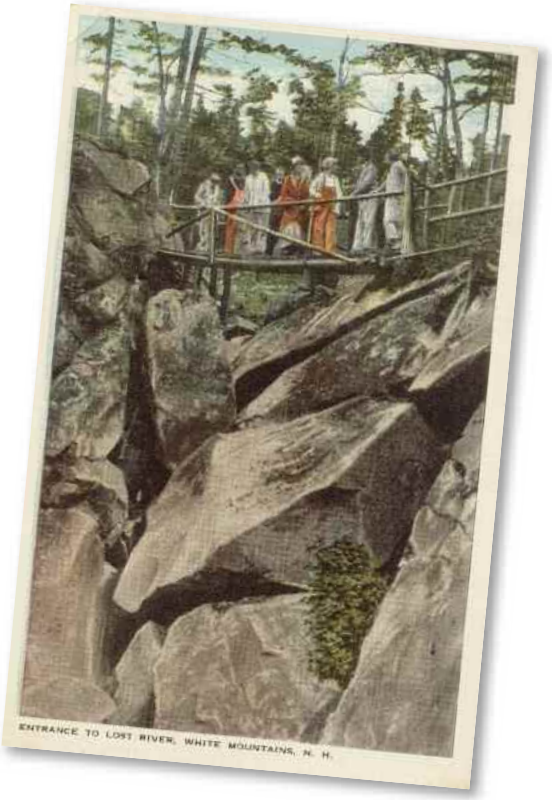
"A careful examination of this hidden wonder of nature's mysterious and prehistoric convulsion reveals wonders second to none in our state of its nature and no other natural wonder, unless it is the Old Man of the Mountain."
– *The Granite Monthly*, August 1912

Adventurous visitors and timber barons would soon follow, and the interests of the two would prompt a preservation effort that today, 100 years later, keeps open a geological portal into the distant past. This year marks the centennial anniversary of the summer that the Forest Society succeeded in acquiring Lost River and securing Kinsman Notch from being ravaged by unsustainable logging.

The maze of rocks and water that are Lost River was formed 150,000 years ago during an Ice Age that brought with it swaths of glaciers. A mile or more thick, the glaciers spent 125,000 years moving southeastward over the White Mountains grinding, lifting, and depositing the rocks that carved and slashed the landscape. Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

Opposite page: *Although the forces that have carved and shaped Lost River Gorge continue to write its history, Lost River is largely the same now as it was the day Lyman Jackman dropped into Shadow Cave in 1852. Shown here, Paradise Falls.* Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

Right: *By the early 1900s, the Jackman brothers were guiding visitors to the gorge on organized tours.* Early postcard from Forest Society archives.



In the Beginning

The history of Lost River is literally written in stone. Born 300 million years ago under the sea that covered the earth, the primordial ooze was heated and folded and cooled, heaved and folded into mountains.

The Ice Age brought with it swaths of glaciers 150,000 years ago. A mile or more thick, the glaciers spent 125,000 years moving southeastward over the White Mountains, grinding, lifting, and depositing rocks that carved and slashed the landscape.

When the ice finally melted, the water carried debris, eroding the rocks and forming the Lost River Gorge. It cut through and smoothed the rocks, carving out basins and potholes, leaving behind waterfalls and wonder.

Legend picks up Lost River's story in 1852, when brothers Lyman and Royal Jackman headed up into Kinsman Notch in search of a fishing hole, most likely what we know today as the Beaver Pond, at the height of land. Poking their way upstream, Lyman suddenly dropped from sight, landing 15 feet lower in an underground pool now called Shadow Cave.

A Natural Attraction

Over the years, the boys would return to the gorge, exploring the caves and spreading stories that began drawing visitors from beyond Woodstock.

The first organized excursion was an 1874 trek by guests of the House of the Seven Gables in North Woodstock comprised of four men and three women. The group, according to local history, spent two days in subterranean discovery, and the collective accounts soon captivated newspaper audiences in distant cities.

"For one-half mile, the stream plays hide-and-seek in the dusky chambers and under piled-up boulders before it leaps out, laughing into the air. Into that one-half mile is crowded more beauty, more grandeur and desolation and wild loveliness than brushes could paint or words could describe if they worked for 20 lifetimes," according to a 1874 newspaper account. But it wasn't until 1893, when Royal Jackman guided visitors to the gorge more than 40 years after his first exploration, that the name was proclaimed.

"This," Royal Jackman said, "is where my brother found the lost river."

Three years later, Frank Carpenter and local historian Elmer Woodbury, who would later become a devoted public servant, went through each and every cave, naming them all and painting those names, largely inspired by Greek mythology, on the rocks. Those names, like Elysian Land, the Judgment Hall of Pluto, the Cave of Odin, and the Falls of Proserpine, remain today.

Other names, like the Cave of the Lost Souls, Journey to the Center of the Earth, Devil's Kitchen, and the Hall of Ships, evoke the spirit of Jules Vern and even Indiana Jones.

Threatened by Private Interests

By the turn of the 20th century, townspeople in Woodstock and Easton decided it was time to establish a road through the notch. In 1903 the state put some money toward it, but by 1905, timber companies, with an eye on the thick, untouched forest, moved in to harvest, and the roadwork came to a halt.

Visitors to Lost River during the logging operations were as devastated as the land. "On arrival at the point in the road where we must leave for the gorge, we found ourselves in the midst of a wilderness of devastation, dead treetops, felled logs, and a network of abandoned log roads. Our cup of indignation was full when irresponsible parties built a shack, wherein to exploit the travelers' hunger, thirst, ignorance, or other weaknesses," according to *Walks and Climbs in the White Mountains*, 1926.

The Forest Society to the Rescue

In 1908, concerned with the rapacious logging, the Forest Society began negotiating with the timber contractors and raising money to buy 147 acres that included Lost River. The organization took its plea to the public.

> "The Kinsman Notch is one of great dignity and beauty, equaling the other famous notches in the state. The Publisher's Paper Co. will donate the river and 150 acres ... provided the Society will buy the standing timber on the tract, which amounts to $7,000." — Forest Society flyer, 1911

When the glacial ice finally melted, water carried debris, eroding and smoothing the rocks to carve out basins and potholes like this one. Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

Through the leadership of Forest Society forester Philip Ayres, combined with $5,000 bequeathed from the estate of Dora Martin of Dover and the remainder raised by local hotels, there was enough money to buy the land.

In July 1912, the governors of the New England states attended the annual forestry meeting at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods. They would visit Kinsman Notch and "the famous Lost River region," according to an account in the *New York Times*, and at the meeting, "It will be determined to purchase and conserve these most remarkable of the scenic glories of the White Mountains.

> "It is the purpose of the Publishers' Paper Company to give in fee ... the 148 acres of land through which Lost River runs to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, provided that the Society succeeds in raising sufficient funds with which to purchase from them the standing timber. More money is needed to cover the expenses of clearing up the slash and waste timber left lying by the lumbermen."
>
> — *The New York Times*, July 14, 1912

Later that week, the influential leaders of the day, including Mrs. Grover Cleveland, Gov. Robert P. Bass, two ex-governors, and now-Capt. Lyman Jackson attended a gala at the Deer Park Hotel in North Woodstock to toast the success of the Forest Society on the acquisition of the Lost River Reservation and to look to the future.

"The one important link now needing welding in order to make the chain of development complete is for the state to aid in completing the road begun a few years ago," reported The Granite Monthly in August 1912. "When this is done, the beautiful but neglected Kinsman Notch will come into what has rightfully belonged to it for years."

Development of the notch would be largely confined to creating a state road through it, connecting Woodstock with the western side of New Hampshire.

(Read more about the details of the Forest Society's efforts to protect Lost River in "Nature's View" on page 30.)

New Life for an Old Gorge

Now under the ownership of the Forest Society, Edward Rollins, the brother of former Gov. Frank Rollins, gave money to build a shelter, restaurant, and gift shop. This sturdy structure, with a massive stone fireplace, remains today. Funds were also provided so that trail crews from the Appalachian Mountain Club, including future governor Sherman Adams, could improve access to the gorge. (See the story on p. 9 about the early Lost River guides.)

Visitors continued to come and be inspired by what many considered the second wonder of New Hampshire. In his 1913 address, lamenting the end of school days no one will forget, Nashua's Mount Pleasant School valedictorian David Eaton began his speech, "I have taken as my subject, 'A Trip to One of the Greatest Natural Wonders of New Hampshire'" and told of the adventure and beauty of the wild place, analogous to the succeeding chapters of their lives.

> "Let us place for ourselves a trail broad and straight through the great world of opportunity ... the great prizes of the world are reserved for the enterprising, for those who have the courage to dare and the will to do. Let our principles be as our granite, our aspirations like our mountains, and our sympathy swift and far reaching as our rivers."
>
> — *The Nashua Telegraph,* June 21, 1913.

Lorna Colquhoun has been writing and reporting about New Hampshire's North Country for many years. A former editor of the Coos County Democrat*, she reported extensively as a correspondent for the* New Hampshire Union Leader *newspaper. She lives in Franconia.*

LOST RIVER GUIDES REVELED IN OUTDOORS, CAMERADERIE

By Lorna Colquhoun

"The guides are usually students representing the leading universities of New England. They are uniformly young men of good character and courteous in every way."
— Lost River and Going Through It, 1925

With a road in place winding through Kinsman Notch, visitors began following it to Lost River to see what was touted as one of New Hampshire's natural wonders.

They followed a boardwalk laid out through the gorge and climbed ladders placed for the hardy to crawl into and out of the caves. For those early travelers, the experience was not as it is now, for they had to gear up in coveralls and be prepared to get dirty.

To assist them, guides were employed, typically college boys with a love of adventure and the outdoors. They lived in a bunkhouse, and their duties ranged from taking tickets and dispatching parties of explorers to washing coveralls and overseeing the grounds.

"One of the great charms of Lost River in the early 1960s, both for the tourists and for us guides, was the lack of commercialism," said David Nelson of Reading, Mass., a guide from 1959 to 1962, the 50th anniversary year. "Tourists appreciated the fact that we ran organized, one-hour tours for small groups, that we used candles instead of electric lights, and that there were few signs. We encountered many interesting people."

The social center of activity for the guides, Nelson said, was the guide shack, where the young men read and chatted. Off duty they hiked, often up to the top of Mount Moosilauke to the Dartmouth Outing Club hut.

"It was not uncommon for the guides to hike to after the evening meal, stay the night and come down before breakfast," according to a remembrance of a 1937 guide.

Among the strapping lads arose their competitive natures, with a record of 50 minutes one year hiking from Lost River to the Moosilauke summit.

After hours, they would also spend time crawling through rocks "to which the public was not invited," according to archival remembrances.

"The friends, particularly the girlfriends, were treated at night by candlelight to crawls with such names as 'Fat Man's Misery,' 'the Nutcracker' and the 'Bobby Buster,'" according to a guide's account of life in the notch. "Softball was played on the highway in the evening; into the woods was out. Outs were frequent."

Early Lost River guides followed a boardwalk laid out through the gorge and climbed ladders placed for the hardy to crawl into and out of caves. Forest Society archive photo.

In the late 1930s, a musical group was formed, the Micro-cephalic Musical Melodramatic Mummers. It was part bottle band and part ensemble, with typical band instruments supplemented by the odd washboard.

"Often we would just take advantage of an evening's peace and quiet to read or just to contemplate life and our unknown futures," Nelson said.

Friendships made each summer at Lost River often spanned lifetimes. In a 1987 remembrance, H.E. Laurence, a guide for two summers in the late 1930s as he studied to be a doctor, told of a party from Michigan that included the physician-in-chief at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

"That's how I got my internship," Laurence wrote.

Fifty years later, he wrote six pages describing all that Lost River meant to him; "two of the best summers I ever had," a knowledge and appreciation of birds, and a love of mountains and hiking.

"Last, but by no means least, the friendship in Gil Knowles," he wrote, referring to the man who founded the Nature Garden at Lost River and who spent many summers working there. "Gil eventually left Lost River and returned to the family home in Epsom to help run the family business. He became my patient and I monitored his health for the rest of his life."

Remembrances of the early guides at Lost River are full of affection and even longing for days that were carefree and fun.

"I never get tired of the place," the late Dwight Taylor of Franconia said in a 1987 newspaper article. "I can't explain it, but it's such a special place."

A 1952 newspaper article concluded, "The boys tell of Lost River with a reverence that enhances its awe-inspiring beauty."

Left: *The nostalgia of caves still lit by lanterns remains.*

Right: *Sturdy boardwalks meander through the gorge, set in a way that allows those who prefer to bypass the caves to do so.*

100 Years Later — Enjoying Lost River Gorge Today

By Lorna Colquhoun Photos by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

Although the forces that have carved and shaped the gorge continue to write its history, geologically, Lost River is largely the same now as it was the day Lyman Jackman dropped into Shadow Cave in 1852. Its ongoing preservation as one of the wonders of the Granite State has evolved over the past 100 years, since the Forest Society stepped in to save it and Kinsman Notch from wide-scale logging that would have made this special place very different.

More than just an experience, a visit to Lost River today is a peek into a timeless wonder for the visitors who pause along the way. It offers a bridge between the generations in this ever-changing world, where parents and grandparents bring children and grandchildren to share the fond memories of a place that has remained virtually unchanged by man over the last century.

Visitors no longer have to change into coveralls before going through the gorge and caves, thanks to the installation of a boardwalk; now comfortable shoes and a sense of adventure are the only accompaniments required to experience the beauty of Paradise Falls or take on the challenge of wiggling through the Lemon Squeezer or the Dungeon.

The sturdy boardwalks meander through the gorge, set in a way that allows those who prefer to bypass the caves to do so. One can only imagine the hands that have passed over the handrails, leaving them smooth and taking from them a story or a photograph.

Below: *The caves of Lost River have names, such as the Cave of the Lost Souls, Journey to the Center of the Earth, Devil's Kitchen, and the Hall of Ships (shown here) that evoke the spirit of Jules Vern and Indiana Jones.*

Throughout the season, school groups and summer camp kids enjoy Lost River as an outdoor classroom, where they not only find it, but also learn about the history, the geology, the plant and wildlife, all of which enhances their understanding of how the world came to be.

The success and popularity of Lost River as one of the draws to the region comes from the Forest Society's partnership with White Mountains Attractions. Since 1967, the association, headquartered down the road in North Woodstock, has managed the daily operations of Lost River Gorge and Boulder Caves.

Together the Forest Society and White Mountains Attractions complement each other, tying together seamlessly the interests of preservation and education and introducing a beautiful place to visitors from around the world.

"In today's fast paced technological world, a walk through Lost River offers a bridge between ages," said Deb Williams, manager of Lost River Gorge. "While the boardwalks have been improved to protect the fragile environment, the nostalgia of caves still lit by lanterns remains."

On this centennial anniversary year of Forest Society ownership of Lost River, visitors can explore a new trail that takes them above the gorge, passing an old-growth tree, a giant pothole, and a vernal pool. New signs that include cave maps, photos, and a timeline offer visitors a window on Lost River's geological history, from its formation to the present day.

If you close their eyes and simply listen, you hear the elemental sounds of the ages, the rushing water and wind whispering through the trees—two things that have not, nor will ever, change.