

Lucky to Know Him

By W. Kent Olson

We met at Needham (Massachusetts) High School in the early 1960s. He taught math. I was a student. I never had a class with “Mr. Preston,” but we bonded over soccer and mountains. He was my coach. Plus he had been an Appalachian Mountain Club hutman and loved the White Mountains. More than anything, I wanted to work in those huts.

I called him Coach. Later he insisted on “Fred,” a role-crossing unfamiliar for a standard kid who saw teachers as distant respectees.

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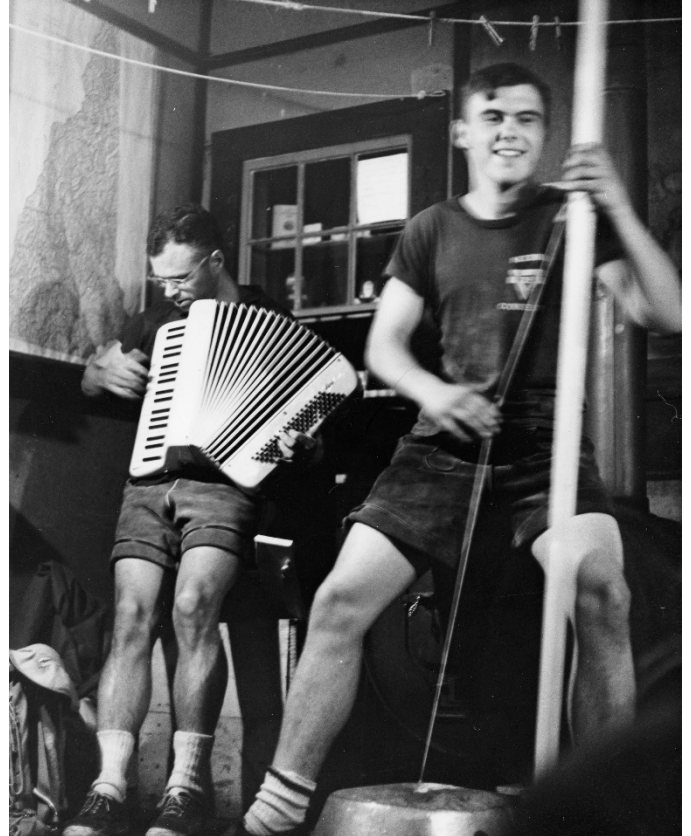
As a coach Fred was not focused on winning *per se*. Yes, he strove to win, but he saw the game as character-defining primarily. His Deerfield team had notched consecutive undefeated seasons. It wasn’t satisfying, he said, “because I wanted to see how they handled losing.”

I thought I could help in that category.

Against Needham’s archrival Braintree, I scored a goal the referee missed because there was no net to confirm the shot. No Braintree player stepped forward to certify the goal. The Braintree coach remained silent. Fred didn’t contest the ref’s call. We lost the game. Our team was angry. I steamed toward the opposing coach, seething, taunting the guy for his dishonesty, ready to swing. Fred watched from yards away. I saw his disappointment.

A day or two afterward he called an in-school team meeting, a rare occurrence. We didn’t know what to expect. He entered and spoke, but not about soccer. He did not mention the loss or our—especially my—behavioral low. Not once did Fred refer to Braintree’s silent lie. No lecture about sportsmanship, ethics or self-control, what’s big or little in life, important or negligible. Instead he told a true story about a boy who had been murdered and of the family’s struggle to cope. The telling took fifteen minutes. We had never experienced such a narrative, direct but without indictment. The gravamen was this: The family

forged through ineffable pain and forgave the killer.



Fred Preston, left, and author at Galehead Hut, 1965. “Good Gemutlekeit!” (Photo by Jack McConnell. Courtesy of AMC Archives.)

Fred was employing what the literary world calls a metaphysical conceit, a stretched comparison between things completely incomparable. Like the craven taking of a life and a family’s moral striving toward grace, compared to a high school soccer loss and the disproportionate conduct attending it. Except that Fred mentioned no athletic misdeeds, chastised no one. He let the forgiveness story stand by itself, work on us without elaboration, then left the stunned room.

I realized, among many things, that although I was not the team captain—the only player allowed

to address a referee—I was the year’s high scorer and failed whatever informal leadership responsibilities burdened that distinction.

Years later, as a college senior, I was the goal keeper and made a save in overtime. Then a player from the other team bumped me backwards into the goal. The ref missed the illegal knockdown but saw me grounded in the net, curled around the ball, and ruled it a score. As team captain I had speaking rights this time around and tried to reason with the official. Meanwhile our coach had become, shall we say, seismically bothered. He launched from the sidelines ranting, fists balled at his thighs, and stalked the ref. In that moment I knew my job was to calm the coach and help him leave the field with everyone’s dignity whole, and did it.

We lost the game. An understated Preston lesson had stuck with me in bookended experiences on the soccer field, my roles and understandings now reversed. A redemption of sorts, whose meanings and textures, I hope, inform my life still.

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I started in the huts the fall of 1963 and spent the following five summers as a hutman. Fred helped me get the job. He’d been a hutman in the late 1940s, rising to hutmaster at Madison. In 1965 he decided he wanted another mountain summer and asked Huts Manager George Hamilton to hire him as Galehead Hutmaster with me as Assistant Hutmaster. It was an honor to work for Fred.

The Galehead pack trail, a twelve-mile roundtrip at the time, involved three unbridged crossings of the Gale River. He once tumbled head-first into it, the top of his pack load under water, and him bent over, his kilted rump risen

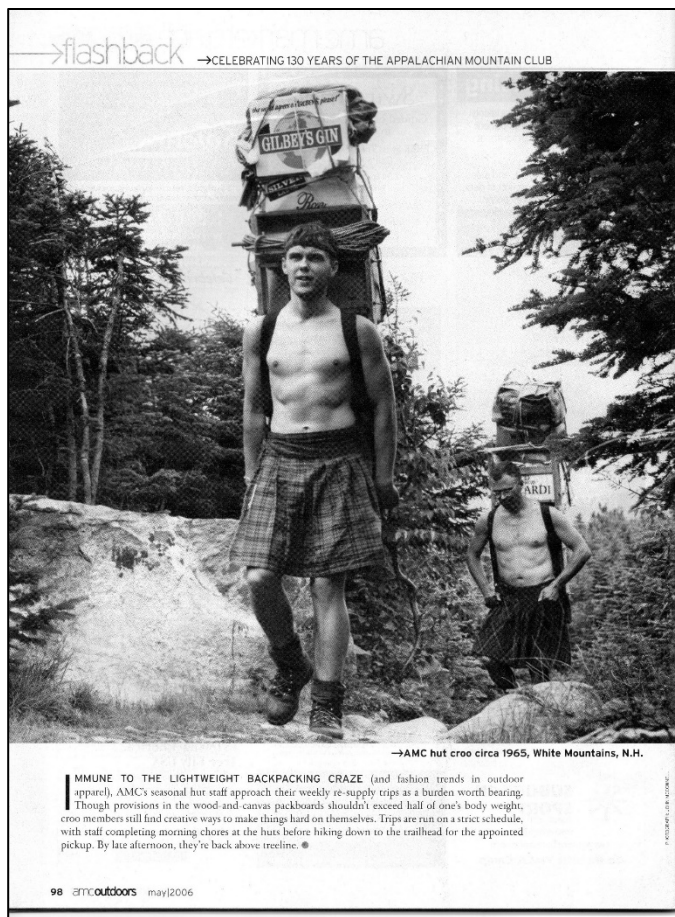
and positioned as if mooning the trail. He resembled a little A-frame in the middle of a river. He was not in danger, just embarrassed, and I took the opportunity to say how well coordinated he looked.

It was part of the packing rivalries we engaged in. One person sped ahead without notice, trying to dust the second guy. After crumps (rest stops where we grounded our pack boards on waist-high rock surfaces and slipped the leather straps briefly) we’d switch places. The second was now in front upping the pace, and so on, hopscotch style, up the six miles and 2,300 vertical feet to the hut and its welcome sign, “The Last Crump”—ending always in laughter and no mention of a race or who might have won.

At thirty-six Fred was the oldest active hutman to that date. But the decade and a half that separated us did not stratify in the way you might think. Fred packed as well as many younger hutmen and outdid them in some feats.

He made two Galehead pack trips not repeated since. With 85 pounds aboard, he took the Bridle Path to Greenleaf Hut and Mount Lafayette (elev. 5,249 feet), a 3,600-foot climb. Tramping south on Franconia Ridge he then bushwhacked 3,000 vertical feet down trailless Lafayette Slide to Thirteen Falls and ascended an unmarked trail (now mapped) along Twin Brook, 1,200 vertical feet to the Galehead. Cumulative ascent: 4,800 feet. A week later I traveled the identical route, roughly 10 miles, with my personal gear only. Stamped into a treacherous section of the slide was a distinctive Limmer boot outline that had to be Fred’s. How odd and fine to step into his shoes.

Later he packed equal poundage to Zealand Hut, up to Zeacliff, across the Twinway



Author, left, with 109 lbs. of food and sundries, packing to Galehead Hut with Hutmaster Fred Preston, 1965. AMC obtained pack boxes from N.H. state liquor stores. (Photo by Jack McConnell. Image courtesy of AMC Outdoors.)

then down the steep, gutted, artless trail from South Twin to Galehead. The cumulative gain was 2,900 feet over the 9.8 mile tramp.

Both treks impressed hut crews who saw Fred en route or heard about them afterward. Consider: The toughest official pack trail is the Valley Way complex, 4 miles and 3,550 vertical feet to Madison Spring Huts.

A year earlier, in 1964, using a two-slatted AMC freighter board from his Madison days, Fred packed a cake to Lakes of the Clouds Hut for my eighteenth birthday. From Crawford Notch, up the Crawford Path and traversing the Southern Presidentials at night, he carried it in a wooden orange crate, with nails hammered into the cake's bottom to keep it from shifting. The load arrived, its frosting panorama of the hut, Ammonoosuc Ravine and Mount Washington mostly intact. The crew swizzled beer and had a great time.

During our Galehead summer Fred taught me how to yodel (sort of), tolerated my learning curve (sort of), offered his car on my days off, and sang ribald songs, which I picked up. Our hut times led to hikes after his marriage, in 1966, to Granthia, including a romp up Old Speck in the Mahoosucs. We spied skinny dippers at the far end of Speck Pond, whose garments lay on rocks near us. Fred grinned deviously, stooped and lifted up a bra, swinging it over his head like a lariat until the swimmers saw us and screamed. We took off laughing.

One winter, in deep snow, we hiked Mt. Jefferson wearing shorts, which flummoxed climbers we passed at treeline. When they were out of sight and hearing, we changed into winter gear—and took off laughing.

Work came first at the hut. Our fun was a byproduct of that philosophy. Fred one day got the idea to pick up rusty nails that had lain outside the hut since its construction in 1932. I griped, saying AMC wasn't paying me \$30 a week as Assistant Hutmaster to scabble ancient nails. On mature reflection, I realized I was in fact being paid \$30 a week to do that job. Fred was humble and thorough, even in folding hut blankets to army-like perfection. When I grossly befouled the kitchen trying to make chocolate wowie cakes shaped like Galehead Hut, he said little but issued a scowl I haven't forgotten. He was among two or three hutmasters I most admired, learned from and tried to emulate as I later moved into my three hutmasterships, at Mizpah, Greenleaf and Madison.

Fred was great with people, the main criterion for excellent hutmastering. (Packing prowess is an irrelevant measure.) He knew crews must converse respectfully and humorously with guests, and applied an unshowy flair to our interactions with them. After dinner, for example, he produced his accordion, and I assembled my gutbucket bass fashioned from a tin washtub, a stick and parachute cord. We played and sang to our charges, the strains of "Red River Valley" coursing over a darkening Pemigewasset Wilderness from our privileged perch, elevation 3,800 feet. Huts Manager George Hamilton participated one night and wrote in the logbook: "Good *Gemutlekeit!*"

One morning late in August, after we'd fed the guests and cleaned the hut, I headed down to the pack house for a load. Fred stayed to cook and to handle arriving hikers. Nearing the old landslide a mile-plus from the hut, I heard unusual sounds over the clatter of the rushing Gale River. It took some seconds to recognize accordion music. Fred sat on the Galehead porch serenading himself, the Pemi, and the slopes of South Twin, which deflected his melodies to my forested spot 1,200 feet below. I was happy for him, for the local echoing he must be experiencing, and for the serendipity of the private wilderness concert he afforded me. Days later the peaks became speckled in shimmering white rime. We would leave the mountains soon, I to my sophomore college year, he to teaching, coaching and, as he put it, "flying my desk."

Many times in our mountain friendship, over his mentorship of a lucky mentee, he referred to himself as my "dear old dad." This the highest compliment, timeworn but true to our circumstances. When years later I asked how to thank him for his effects on my life, he said, "Do the same for someone else." I have tried, but think my abilities don't match his.

This man—who stood as best man at my wedding—helped me develop a thirty-one year career in conservation, starting as AMC Huts Manager and then as AMC Publications Director and Editor of *Appalachia*, which led to my heading three nonprofits. Whatever I have accomplished or flubbed, all I know is that Fred influences my decisions even in my retirement. He helps me try to live an ethical life, accountable to others and to ideas bigger than oneself.

The AMC benefited from Fred's perspective, intellect and tenor. He served on the governing board, the Hut and Publications committees, and as club President, with distinction in all cases, living what he taught many.

You have only to look at Brooks, Lynelle, Camille and their families to understand Fred and Granthia reared them to civic purposes and to better the things they can influence in life. The scurrying little ones are themselves full of life zeal founded in love passed on, tintured, we can be sure, with the giving spirit of their elders.

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I saw Fred three days before he died. Granthia had invited me to visit. Difficult as it was to witness his suffering (from Alzheimer's) that no one could stop, let alone reverse, there was nonetheless something positive and beautiful in having consequential minutes with him at his final stage. For most of our visit he writhed quietly, uttering occasional phrases hard to parse, his eyes often closed. Yet he was aware of Granthia and me close by.

I watched the long, wonderful love between them express itself in complementary physical movements and customized communication signals, as her touches and talking infused what consciousness he had left. He squeezed our hands to acknowledge the words she funneled into his ears.

The next morning, after the nurses bathed and dressed him, I knelt beside his wheelchair. Fred was lean and clean and—so help me—looked as if he could pack Galehead. From nowhere came a miraculous two minutes of lucidity in which he said, in clear voice and with clear eyes, "Kenny, you drove all the way from Acadia." He smiled. I told him I loved him and appreciated everything he had done for me and was there to thank him. In self-reflection and with a guileless irony about the patent reality of his condition, Fred said, "It is what it is." Another smile. "So stay calm and carry on." Those were his last words to me.

I kissed him on the head and, after a final look at my dear old dad, left the room.

I feel Fred is with us today, somewhere in the gorgeous mountains over my shoulder—between Chocorua and Tripyramid, say—watching us.

Listen quietly. Maybe you will hear an accordion.

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Galehead Hut, "The Last Crump," 1965. (Photo by Jack McConnell. Courtesy of AMC archives.)

Originally titled "Aren't We Lucky to Have Known

Him: Remembering Fred Preston." Revised and expanded from remarks spoken in a high meadow near Squam Lake, New Hampshire, June 20, 2015.

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