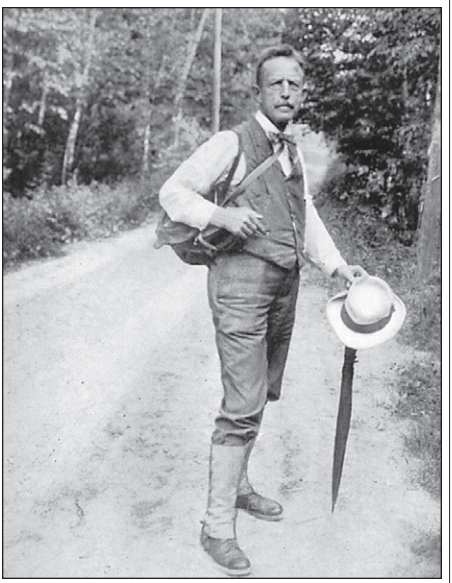
Herbert Welsh

HERBERT WELSH: WALKING CRUSADER

by Shelly Candidus

Herbert Welsh was a man with many missions, and the drive to devote himself to them during his long and active life. Son of John Welsh, minister to Great Britain under President Hayes, he was born in Philadelphia in 1851 and could have led a privileged life within the confines of the narrow society of the time. Instead, he turned his attentions to the larger world. An accomplished artist, as a young man he studied art in Paris. When he returned to the United States, he traveled through the west and visited extensively with the Sioux Indians, which launched a life-long advocacy for Indian Rights. He also worked for political reform, World War I relief and reconstruction, and preservation of the magnificent forests of Mount Sunapee.

Welsh's connection to Sunapee was a long and happy one. Since the 1890s, the Welsh family vacationed at their summer home, "Min Afon" on Garnet Street. In the early to mid-1900s, the family, including Herbert, his wife Fanny, his two sons and daughter and their families, traveled to Sunapee for the season. As the family grew, they acquired an adjoining property and "Midway" accommodated the grandchildren and their friends and families. Joseph Chapline, a fellow Philadelphian and close friend of Welsh's grandson, Herbert Frazer Welsh, summered with Frazer and recalls that arrivals were timed to coincide with the unfreezing of pipes bringing lake water to the cottages while departures in the fall were set by the need to shut off the water to avoid frozen pipes.



Hebert Welsh, Photo from "The New Gentleman of the Road" Copyright 1921.

Chapline, now a Newbury resident, recalls summers full of outdoor enjoyment and the unending activities of the many children. However, indoor life on Garnet Street was not fancy. "The elder Mr. Welsh was an accomplished artist," says Chapline. "He painted some wonderful murals on the walls of "Min Afon" but as you sat indoors looking at them, you could see daylight right through the chinks in the walls." Frazer Welsh was an aeronautics expert and had his own plane in which he traveled to his summer home. Chapline was present in the late 1940s with Welsh family members when Frazer flew over the cottage, dipped his wings to signal his imminent landing at Newport airport, and was killed when the plane crashed on landing. Following his death, "Min Afon" was sold, although heirs of Herbert Welsh's son Richard still come to Sunapee from Sweden to spend summer time at the adjoining property.

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The pull of Sunapee for Herbert Welsh was similar to a migrating bird that is summoned every spring by an irresistible force of nature. And like a migrating creature, Welsh used his own resources to reach his destination. From 1914 at age 63, until 1930 at age 79, Welsh walked from his home in Germantown, outside Philadelphia, to Sunapee! He was quite precise about his time of departure - mid-May - and planned his route for arrival before mid-June, marching 20 to 25 miles per day. He kept a daily diary of his walks, or "tramps", for 1919 and 1920. They were published by The Philadelphia Ledger and later appeared in book form under the title The New Gentleman of the Road. These accounts are a fascinating portrait of the man and of the time and places through which he traveled.

Keeping Stride

Welsh's trek covered roughly 450 miles, depending on the route. It was much the same each year: from Philadelphia to New Jersey, through New York (where he crossed the Hudson River on the ferry - the only part of the journey not made on his own two feet), into Connecticut, across the Massachusetts Berkshires, on to Vermont, into New Hampshire at Claremont and thence to Sunapee. Digressions were made from year to year to visit friends and colleagues in Princeton and New Haven, his daughter in New York City, or favorite historic sites.

Years of repeating this walk gave him the ability for precise planning. The route was calculated by his allotted miles per day. He also knew just what items to put in his rucksack: underclothing, toilet articles, his diary, some snacks (dried beef, dried prunes, crackers, hard-boiled eggs). Slung over his shoulder was a blanket rolled within a waterproof poncho, a boy-scout kit, an extra pair of his favorite "troc-moc" leather walking shoes, and over his arm, an umbrella. The assembled gear carried a weight of 25 pounds. Each day's walk included a short break for refreshment mid-morning and mid-afternoon, and a substantial nap of 1 to 1 1/2 hours after the noon "dinner." Welsh notes, "The time seemingly lost was more than covered...by the resting, bracing effect in body, mind, and spirit." Naps were taken in spots carefully selected for grassiness and quiet. If necessary, permission to rest under a shade tree or in an orchard was asked of a land owner along the way. Then the poncho was unrolled to protect from the damp, and the blanket, if needed, kept off the breeze.

By choice, Welsh was an early riser. Ideally, he was up by 5:30 a.m., had breakfast by 6:30, and was on the road by 7. Unless he had errands to attend to, such as cashing a check or getting his shoes repaired, or enjoying a two-day layover with friends, he chafed at delays. Yet for all his precision and planning, his springtime walk to Sunapee was an exercise in freedom from the constraints of

A Glimpse of Lake Sunapee from Mount Sunapee
From a photograph by Mr. Herbert S. Welsh

Photo from the "Manual of Mount Sunapee", 1915

family and social conventions. His diaries contain almost no mention of his family, save for one telling entry in which he fairly laments their arrival at the cottage: "The glorious freedom...left me early in July when Mrs. Welsh, a retinue of skilled and amiable domestics, and later a number of the loveliest members of our immediate family...bring to the cottage civilization and order...One delightful bit of freedom that I shall not cease to mourn for ...is [the] inability to rise at 5:30 in the morning, to dress without the torturing thought that others are robbed of their rest by mouse-lie sounds and scurryings in the lower room; also that I can no longer breakfast at 6:30. These privileges are no more."

A Step Back in Time

Welsh walked through a world far different from ours. Encounters with automobiles were infrequent, except when approaching or leaving a large city where caution was needed to avoid cars on one hand and trolleys on the other. In several spots, roads were under repair or being constructed. He found turnpikes, or "automobile roads" provided the best walking surface, while unpaved roads, particularly if sandy, slowed his pace. Occasionally, an "automobilist" would stop to ask him where he was bound, and why, and often would offer him a ride, which was always declined, rain or shine. However, Welsh enjoyed these encounters with strangers and always found them enlightening. While aware that he presented an unusual sight on the road, he did not hesitate to approach a likely-looking farm to request a stop for rest and refreshment - and often a mid-day dinner. He paid his way and enjoyed the company, professing to learn a great deal from farmers and villagers whom he was fond of describing as "intelligent" and "amiable." For one who expended so much physical energy, his meals were simple: Coffee, milk, bread and eggs were his wayside meals, supplemented by stops for milk or ice cream during the day. Meals at an inn or boarding house consisted of more of the same, with canned or chipped beef, fried bacon and fruit or salads. Although a firm supporter of Prohibition, Welsh enjoyed a glass or two of "near beer" when it could be found. He kept strictly within his budget and tracked daily expenses, paying 50 cents to a dollar for dinner and $2 for supper, lodging and breakfast at an inn or boarding house. If the price exceeded what he thought reasonable, he would move on, even if it was the end of a weary day's walk.

Dorothy Whipple accompanied Welsh on his journeys.

Welsh carried travelers' checks and cash. He reasoned: "I have never yet had my pocket picked or suffered assault and had money taken from me on any part of the earth's surface...". The only hostile force that he encountered was thunderstorms, which prompted him to seek shelter in the nearest dwelling that carried a roof. Telephones were widely available, especially in large towns, but were rarely used by Welsh. He speaks of calling a friend to arrange a visit and marvels at his voice, instantly "reproduced electrically over the 'phone'."

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Walking in Tandem

Although content to be a solitary walker, Welsh welcomed the accompaniment of friends for short stretches of the journey. In 1920, he set off from Philadelphia with three companions - all ladies. Two of them soon left the party but Dorothy Whipple, Welsh's secretary and assistant, stayed the course all the way to Sunapee. They appear to be an incongruous pair: he at age 68, a veteran traveler used to setting his own schedule and pace, and she, aged 20, attractive, bright, energetic and an untried long distance hiker. Welsh admits to having concerns about his responsibility for the young lady and her unknown ability to keep his pace, but she proved to be a worthy pedestrian, adept at finding friendly hosts along the way and even using the telephone to occasionally arrange for lodging. Welsh did not consider her position as traveling companion in any way compromising because the thought of any impropriety would never cross his mind. He was able to share with her his favorite spots along the route, and she was a ready audience for his many observations. After they had partaken of the customary afternoon nap, each on a rolled out poncho, Welsh would "join with my young friend in a brief prayer for safety and guidance on the journey, while I would read a short portion from the Acts of the Holy Apostles from a small pocket testament..."

Welsh was an unabashed admirer of attractive young women, and would often mention a happenstance meeting with them. Stopping at a country store for ice cream, he fell into conversation with a family with two daughters, "the older... a singularly beautiful and graceful girl of not more than fifteen years." They discussed Welsh's journey, his interests in artistic and philanthropic causes and mutual acquaintances. All the while, Welsh kept his eye on the beautiful girl, writing later "I felt tempted strongly to stop over for twenty-four hours...getting first the mother's permission to sketch that fifteen-year old daughter. She would have made the fortune of a really competent figure painter."

Young women were not the only sources of beauty on these trips. Almost daily, Welsh would use words and often sketches to record the natural world around him. A sunset in the Berkshires was painted for the reader: "The valley lay to the left of the road, with trees ...jutting irregularly against the sky. To the right of the road... a fringe of beautiful trees separating it from a tranquil stream...its surface reflecting the splendor of orpiment and crimson, warm, faint green of the west, and delicate mauve of sunset clouds in shadow, which adorned the sky."

Saving the Mountain

The beauty of unspoiled natural surroundings stirred Welsh deeply. He prized roadside trees for their welcome shade and lamented marching into New Haven in 1919 and finding the "great numbers of splendid elm trees" which shaded the public

View from Sunapee Mountain House, circa 1876.

Herbert Welsh

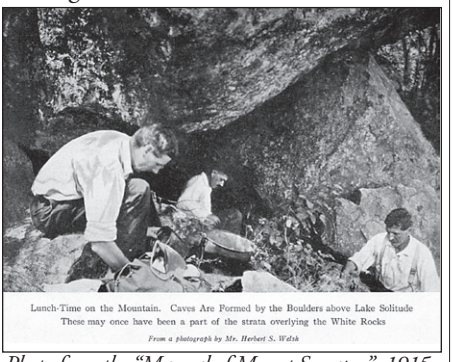
Log Cabin at Lake Solitude - circa 1918.

square "destroyed by some blight or pest." As his artist's eye took in a scene, he was drawn to mountains with their unspoiled forests and magnificent tree specimens. It is no wonder, then, that Welsh was shaken to the core by the extensive clear-cut logging operation on Mt. Sunapee's north face which went on from 1906 through 1909. It seemed clear to Welsh and many of his neighbors that the beauty of Mt. Sunapee was being ruined and its primeval forest and rare plants were in danger of disappearing. He was determined to put a stop to the destruction.

Donald MacAskill, in his 1981 publication *Mt. Sunapee State Park/A Comprehensive History*, recounts how Abija Johnson obtained a parcel of land on the mountain in the early 1800s near what is now the traffic circle on Route 103. There, on a natural plateau, he built a large farmhouse, barn and a dam in the brook east of the site to provide water-power for a sawmill. The view was superb and summer visitors were beginning to seek accommodations in the area, so the Johnson family first took in boarders at their comfortable farmhouse, and 1867-68 opened a hotel on the site known as the Sunapee Mountain House. The hotel burned in 1876, and while the Johnsons continued to take in boarders and farm the land for another 30 years, they left the mountain in 1906. The loggers were right behind them, and lost no time is cutting virtually every tree on the property, leaving behind slash and discarded rotting timber.

MacAskill credits Herbert Welsh in being instrumental in halting the destruction on the north side of Mt. Sunapee. Welsh organized people around the lake - year round and summer residents - to raise money for the cause, and he asked the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests to help in negotiations to acquire the land. In 1911, the group had raised $8,000 for an initial purchase of 656 acres. This included the summit, Lake Solitude, and almost the entire north side of the mountain above the Johnson farm. The land was acquired to save it from being logged again, so it could provide pleasure for future generations. The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests was designated trustee, and through this action led the way for a new era of forest preservation legislature.

Welsh's group became the Sunapee branch of the Society, and raised an additional $1,200 in 1912 for building trails, opening springs, clearing slash, and other work on the mountain. A log shelter and fireplace were built at Lake Solitude for hikers who wished to spend the night. Undoubtedly, Welsh was among them, as this area was one of his



Lunch-Time on the Mountain. Caves Are Formed by the Boulders above Lake Solitude
These may once have been a part of the strata overlying the White Rocks
From a photograph by Mr. Herbert S. Welsh

Photo from the "Manual of Mount Sunapee", 1915

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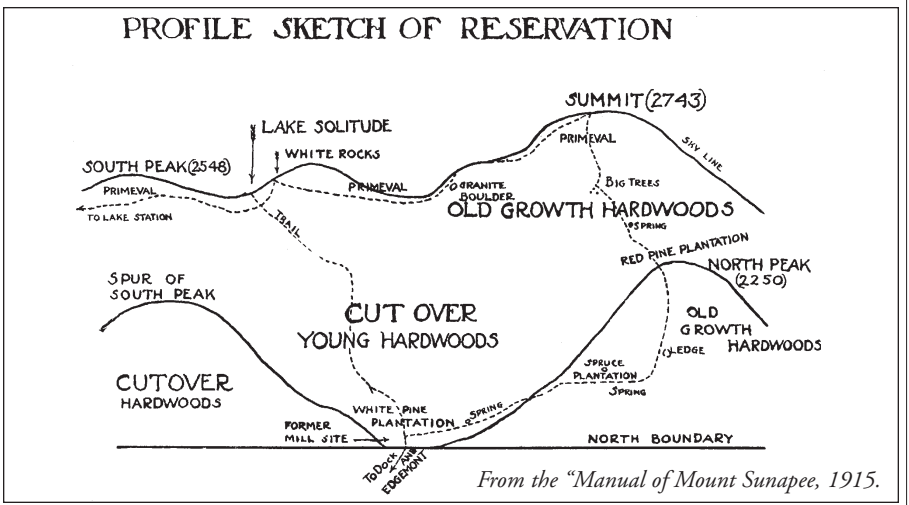

From the "Manual of Mount Sunapee, 1915.

favorites and he enjoyed exploring the cave formations there. The Society continued its land purchases and by 1934 had acquired 1,185 acres. The cabin at Lake Solitude was rebuilt and trails were expanded and maintained. Wooden trail maps were installed at the base of each trail. Summer hikers began to flock to the mountain and would change its character forever.

Throughout Mt. Sunapee's transition from a hiker and nature lover's mecca to a state-owned ski area, to today's commercial privately-operated ski resort, concerned local citizens and state agencies continue to lobby for the preservation of the irreplaceable primeval forest - those areas of old growth which have never been cut. In 1999, the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory, a division of DRED, prepared a report detailing the old growth forest locations within the area leased by Mt. Sunapee Resort. The report lists several recommendations for preserving these areas, as well as methods to protect an endangered orchid found in a ski trail area.

Herbert Welsh would certainly approve of these efforts. For him, the end of the long walk each summer was the beginning of an agenda. On his arrival at Sunapee with Dorothy Whipple in 1929, his last diary entry reads: "And there we made ourselves ready to begin...a summer campaign...for the rights of the North American Indians; for the control and, let us hope, elimination of the White Pine Blister Rust, the menace of New Hampshire; the acquisition of an additional tract of land to be added to the public park already established on Mount Sunapee, and other things...for the general public good and that of men and women, rich or poor, high or low, white, black, or yellow, who compose the great human family."

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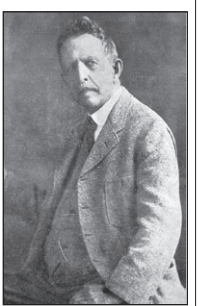
All quotes from Herbert Welsh are from his book, The New Gentleman of the Road, Wm. F. Fell Co. Printers, Philadelphia, 1921.



H. Welsh, 1929.