

Jeff Howatt: Teacher, guide and storyteller

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By Nicole Carter Advertiser Democrat

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WILTON — Mt. Blue High School math teacher Jeffrey Howatt says he is no author. Yet, a crowd gathered Sept. 12 at the Wilton Free Library to hear him talk about his recently published book, *Campfires along the Allagash and other Maine Rivers*. Instead, he explained, he is a story teller.

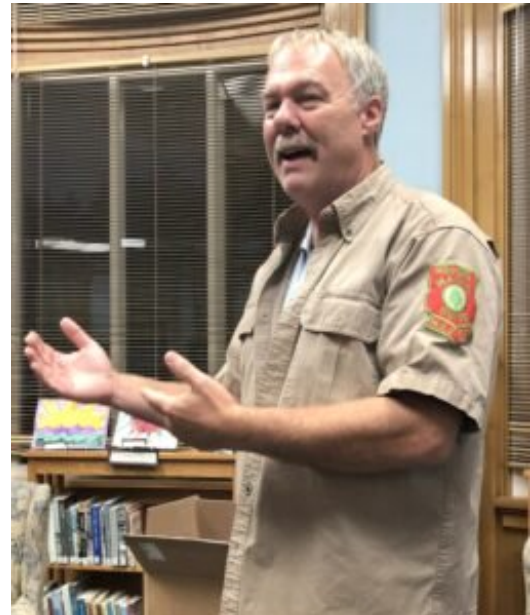
Howatt's book contains amusing stories about his many years teaching, parenting, and guiding along Maine waterways. There was the time he fought an eagle for a fish and won, unwittingly assisted by seagulls. When he led a four-generation family of 46 on a camping excursion to Flagstaff Lake. The cautionary tales about the night his toddler son achieved potty-training and the consequences of a Great Blue Heron flying low over one's canoe (hint: the bird's nickname is well earned).

The journey it took for his narratives to become a book, it turns out, is also entertaining.

"My stories began when they changed up math class," Howatt said as he opened the evening. "Math used to be 47 minutes. Then they changed it to 80 minutes of class time. Now, there are a few kids who enjoy 80 minutes of math. And then they leave my class and go off to enjoy 80 minutes of chemistry.

"But for most kids, 80 minutes is over capacity. And after about 50 minutes, it's easy to see. So I began taking breaks—tell a little story to wake them up and recharge them. After a few minutes I would drift from my story back into math, and by then the students would be with me and re-engaged."

After being regaled with stories about his kids, his parents, his adventures canoeing and fishing through Maine, Howatt's students began encouraging him to write a book. This struck him as funny, but a good idea nonetheless. He would have a nice heirloom detailing his times as a Maine Guide for his family. With each story only being a few paragraphs it seemed doable, even with his lack of spelling, grammar and technical skills.



Master Maine Guide Jeffrey Howatt, telling stories from his recently published book, *Campfires Along the Allagash & Other Maine Rivers*. He rarely wears an official Maine Guide shirt on expeditions because it makes people ask him too many questions. *Livermore Falls Advertiser* photo by Nicole Carter

"I don't even carry a flip phone," Howatt told his library audience. "I had to borrow a printer from a friend to print the pages, because I don't own one. I used three-hole punched paper and put them in a binder."

Then friends started requesting copies. So he redid his binder into a 95-page plastic comb-binding booklet and had about 30 copies printed. More people wanted them. One of the English teachers at Mt. Blue High School requested extra copies—she wanted to use it as the workbook for a proof-reading class.

"I did a third version," Howatt said. "My wife is quite good at drawing and she did a number of illustrations for it. We made 100 copies, and we sold 80."

That seemed good enough, but fast forward to 2016.

"My wife, daughter and I were doing a day hike along the Appalachian Trail," Howatt said. "And we came across this woman lying in the trail, hurt. She had rolled an ankle. Of course we needed to help her, she couldn't walk on her own. We were parked fairly close, about a mile and a half through a little-used path. So my daughter and I picked up her gear, and my wife helped the injured hiker hobble out.

"My daughter and I went ahead, and the two women were a ways behind us. They chatted as they went and became acquainted. My wife asked her what she did for work, and she said she was a publisher. And my wife replied, 'well, that's a coincidence, because my husband wrote this stupid book.'"

One thing led to another and at the injured hiker's request, the Howatts sent her some copies of the third edition of his book. The rest is history. Almost.

Reached for comment, the hiker and Maine book publisher recalled their meeting a little bit differently.



One of the characters Howatt found along the Allagash waterway. *Livermore Falls Advertiser* photo by Nicole Carter



The four iterations of Jeffrey Howatt's book *Campfires Along the Allagash & Other Maine Rivers* from printed binder to published soft cover. *Livermore Falls Advertiser* photo by Nicole Carter

"I hike sections of the Appalachian Trail every year," Nancy Randolph said by phone Friday morning. "I was in the fourth day of a week-long hike. It had rained and I had to cross the East Branch of the Piscataquis River. The water was 6 inches higher than normal, and my boots got soaked. I lost a hiking pole. I switched to wearing my water shoes, and hung my saturated boots from my pack, which made my load much heavier and the hike more difficult.

"I was sitting by the trail when the Howatts came upon me. I was tending to my aching feet, applying powder, putting on dry socks. I asked if they wouldn't mind carrying out my boots when they returned that way. They continued their day hike and I re-started mine, leaving the boots where we first met."

So she hadn't been injured?

"No," Randolph, who is a Maine Guide herself, said. "Hurt? No. Hurting? Yes."

Then how did Randolph and Howatt's wife come to discuss his book of stories?

Randolph decided to go to a hikers' hostel in Monson to rest her blisters and when the Howatts came back through she accepted their offer to drive her there. She said that Howatt picked up her wet boots while his wife carried her pack and walked along with her across the side-trail to their car.

"His wife did walk out to their car with me. We did strike up an acquaintance and she brought up that he had written his book," said Randolph. "But I don't recall her saying it was stupid."

However the details have been remembered, the chance encounter on the Appalachian Trail between a teller of Maine stories and a publisher of Maine stories resulted in Howatt's book, *Campfires along the Allagash and other Maine Rivers*. Randolph was amused to hear of the differences between his story and her recollection; his ability to spin a yarn is exactly what has made the book a success (she did not disagree with Howatt's self-assessment of his writing and grammar skills).

"Jeff is a wonderful story teller," Randolph said. "He fits in with the brand that I publish—Maine authors writing books about Maine topics. And his book is selling well."

Well enough that Howatt is close to completing a second book, this one appropriately focusing on hiking the Appalachian Trail section between Mounts Katahdin and Washington. He found the time to work on it courtesy of the many snow days that kept him from teaching school.

It would be interesting to know if his first meeting with Randolph is in the manuscript. And to see what version makes it past editing and ends up in print.

Comments are not available on this story.



Jeff Howatt reads from his book *Campfires Along the Allagash & Other Maine Rivers* at the Wilton Free Public Library on Sept. 12. *Submitted photo*