

It has been many years now since I have been able to “spend the summer” on Upper Baker Pond in East Orford, NH, but I return to the area each year because it is like “coming home” to a place my parents gave to me. Most people I know have never heard of Orford, NH, but to those who were ever part of Sunset Ranch Camp it is a very special place.

My parents, Bud and Pat Durham, purchased Sunset from my dad’s Uncle Lou and Aunt Laura Sorg who ran Camp Lauroweld, and thus continued the recreational camp tradition about the time I was born in 1953. They began their camp in Greenfield, NH and then moved to the gorgeous lakefront property on Upper Baker Pond in Orford. So, as my mom always said, I “grew up in camp” from the time my mom’s cousin Peggy Wood helped care for me as a baby, through my school age and college years and beyond. I am thankful that my own children, Matthew and Whitney, experienced camp in their formative years as well and that my late husband Dave Styer was willing to pitch in and help while we were raising our family.

This area on the edge of the White Mountains is as beautiful as anywhere and my heart is warmed as I take in the sights when I travel there each summer. Cruising up Interstate 91 along the Connecticut River Valley, I set eyes on Mount Cube and the surrounding hills before I reach the exit in Fairlee, Vermont. Anticipation builds as I cross the bridge into NH, pass the Orford Social Library and turn onto 25A. Sometimes I take the shortcut over Dame Hill from Orfordville, other times I go around, both routes offering the spectacular views of Mount Moosilauke and the granite rocks on top of Mount Cube. When I finally reach Upper Baker Pond I eagerly await listening to the familiar sounds on the lake - the motorboats, the loon calls, and especially the splashing of the waves on the rocky shoreline. My joy is complete when I can get out on the water and take in the views of Mount Cube, “Saddleback”, and “Dead Man’s Cliff”.

I climbed Mount Cube many times over the years and it was never easy for me, short, but steep. When I was a young girl, “UNC”, (Uncle Lin Workman), would urge me on. He taught me to keep a granite pebble under my tongue to quench my thirst. In later years, Don Tatham, taught me to identify wintergreen along the trail. We always enjoyed the wild blueberries at the top of the mountain. I fondly remember picking blueberries with Betty Griffin in a pasture at the base of Mount Cube and seeing bear scat!

There are many critters in the area and it can be a treat to see them. Over the years I have seen eagles, loons, beavers, moose, deer and bear. Chippies and squirrels are common as are the minnows and fish nests in the shallow waters of the lake. Less welcome are the mosquitoes, flying squirrels (we once heard one giving birth in the wall of our cottage) and bats in the cabin. One evening we counted dozens of bats emerging from the chimney at the Griffin cottage at dusk.

Nature was a playground for me and the campers. As a little girl, I held “tea parties” on a big rock near the Main Lodge at Sunset. We climbed and slid down “Sunset Rock” and “Little Sunset Rock” and explored “Little Lost River” in front of Colby (the DC) and “Fisherman’s Rock” near the Lodge. Swimming the lake was a great challenge and one I did often with Betty Griffin. In nearby Wentworth we swam in the cold of the old fashioned swimming hole and played in the “water chutes” near Warren off 118. A few times I explored the inlet near the public beach on Upper Baker by canoe as far as I could

before having to hoof it over the beaver dams further in. Horseback riders would take trail rides out to the Beaver Pond.

My mom, Betty and I took many back road excursions and I still enjoy going over Piermont Heights road or even taking Indian Pond and Archertown which we had to do one year when 25A washed out. I always chuckle when I remember Don Tatham telling of roads getting “washboardy” or “thrown up”. One summer Don connected us with a baker deep in the woods near Rumney for a wedding cake for our friends Jeff and Bev who got married in a private ceremony in Kathy Baker’s garden. Dave and I thought we would never find it, but we did, in the days before GPS.

Perhaps the most special memories of all come from the wonderful camp experiences my folks offered to so many campers over 30 years. My dad was very creative and able to identify and nurture the unique qualities in each camper, giving many a chance to shine where they might not otherwise. Each day’s schedule was packed full of unique activities from flag raising to lights out. City and suburban kids got to experience building projects, trail rides, caring for horses, rocketry (it was great fun retrieving the rockets from the motorboat), sports with local camps and towns, cleaning local churches, crafts, music, dramatic skits, vespers, sailing, swimming, waterskiing and more.

At Sunset we had wonderful support staff like local Irene Chase, our cook, Uncle Lin and Aunt Jo Workman, and Aunt Gert Miller, our camp nurse. Campers returned year after year and some grew into “ranch hands” and counselors.

In the campground years, my folks welcomed others who became life long friends like the Griffins who bought the Ryan cottage down the lake. Peggy Wood married John Rogers and they vacationed with their family every year at Sunset and eventually built their log home on Piermont Heights Road.

Indeed, this little community in Orford is a very special place and my parents are buried on the hillside up Cemetery Road. They left a legacy to me here and with these memories I am truly blessed.

Martha Durham Styer

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