

RAMBLINGS OF AN OLD BACK PACKER

by Joe Barella

Since I've begun writing about my experiences, I've wanted to write about my winter backpacking trips and describe the euphoria I felt, but because they were short forays, (two to five days), I found it difficult to find a way to do them justice. They occurred over a period of five or six years after my 1990 Appalachian Trail thru hike. My most memorable trip was one I was to pattern a trip after for a number of years. This particular trip and the ones that followed always took place just after the Christmas holidays were over and because the four or five days would sometimes include New Year's, I looked at them as kind of a rebirth of my spirit for the year.

The first one started at the parking lot on Route 41 at the bottom of Under Mountain Trail in early afternoon. The trail, quite slippery with packed snow and ice from day hikers going to Bear Mountain, was fairly easy for the first half mile or so until the grade became steeper. As it steepened there were quite a few spots where I had to go off the trail where there was around a foot and a half of snow for traction but the steep part is brief so I was soon in gentler terrain a half mile before the junction with the Appalachian Trail. I stopped at the spring that crosses the trail a quarter mile before the junction, kneeled, leaned over and drank directly from the spring, enjoying the icy coldness of it. I'd always found that spring to be one of the best tasting and prettiest as it wound its way through snow-covered boulders, the bottom covered with sharp irregular pieces of ledge, the water so clear and clean. When I arrived at the junction I found the tracks from previous hikers all turned toward Bear Mountain so the trail towards Bond Shelter (now Brassy Brook) was undisturbed and in spite of being a foot and a half deep, much easier to walk in. The shelter is less than a half mile from the junction so I was quickly there.

Because the shelter is faced south and surrounded on the other sides by conifers, it tends to get dark there very early when the sun sets, especially in midwinter, so I quickly set up my tent in the shelter knowing it would probably be below zero in the morning. My bivy tent is not entirely free-standing, so I used cracks in the decking to anchor the bottom. Because of the spacing in the cracks I had to use short lengths of parachute cord to tighten up the tent which still sagged a little. I knew it would be good enough to keep the wind out and be a little bit warmer. I had only hiked six and a half miles but between the very slippery trail, my late start, and the short day, by the time I finished the tent, had a snack and crawled into my sleeping bag it was already pitch dark.

It was a pretty comfortable night in that tent in spite of a strong wind into the shelter. I had worn my winter gear, tee shirt, sweatshirt, insulated vest topped with a down ski jacket. My pants were baggy, thin, nylon cuffed ones. For my feet, I had a pair of insulated down booties (which Pat had made for me from a discarded jacket) over two pairs of sox. Even my midnight call was pleasant as the moon and stars lit up the small open area near the shelter.

When I woke up at six a.m. and checked my little thermometer it read minus one which is actually warm for the area at that time of the year. I lay around until seven when it lightened up and then headed north towards Bear Mountain. As I approached the steepening area and just before Bear, I noticed a set of prints to the left that headed west and wondered if I knew the person that made them. These unblazed side trails are seldom used in the winter and then only by a few of us diehards. As I gained

elevation the bushes along the trail became more stunted and the wind had been able to drift snow onto the hard packed trail making the going less slippery and easier. By the time I reached the monument (which is a loose pile of rocks about 20 feet high), the temperature was up to about 25 degrees in bright sunlight, great for sitting atop it and enjoying the view of Twin Lakes below while I snacked on apple slices that I'd prepared myself and dried on the mantle over the woodstove. Rested and full, I headed down the north side of Bear towards Sage's Ravine. As I headed down a steep section, I found the thawing and refreezing had created an ice chute on the trail. Ever since I had first encountered this very same thing some years earlier on the south side of Race Brook Falls, I always carried 50 feet of clothesline rope to loop over a bush or through a root to lower myself to the next foothold. I lowered myself twice to get down the worst sixty feet or so before I was able to negotiate the rest without a rope. It was a slow process picking my way across icy areas as the trail switch-backed west around the mountain, but in 15 minutes or so I was on the flat area before the trail descends into Sage's Ravine on a gentle slope. This too, was all ice, so I stayed off trail but parallel, staying lined up with trees that would stop me as I slid down in some places. The beauty of the ravine was worth all my effort. The stream looked almost black against the brilliant white of the snow. The steeply rising and high banks that the trail wove through were lined with icicled falls from the small rills along them. The trail itself rises and falls with the ledges and the ice from many rills crossing the trail made it treacherous. I did, in fact, have my feet go out from under me but my backpack protected me from injury. The stream itself plunges into deep pools creating beautiful falls that bubble and foam for a quarter mile or so before flattening out when the trail crosses it towards Race Mountain. I crossed the stream and pulled out the register that's kept in a box there and checked out some of the entries and signed it before figuring out my next move. I had thought about tenting in a stand of pines near the top of Race Brook Falls, but I could see by the sun's position that it was already past noon and if the going was as slow as it had been, I'd be lucky to be there before 5:30 which is dusk at that time of year. After mulling it over for a while, I decided it would be prudent to back track through the ravine up to the flat area before Bear Mountain and head west towards Northwest Cabin. It was less than four miles and better yet it had a stove. The trip through the ravine was even more rewarding on the way back because of the different perspective and the fact that I now knew where there was ice underneath the snow.

I arrived at the cabin somewhere around 3 or 4, dropped off my pack, and went to the small stream that runs nearby and filled water bottles. While I wasn't really cold, I could tell that the temperature was dropping. There was some wood piled up against the side of the cabin and plenty of kindling on the dead branches of the hemlocks that surrounded the cabin, so I soon had a nice fire. There was no damper on the stove pipe so I knew the fire wouldn't last long and in spite of the cabin being quite well built, cold air rushed in from all directions and yet the fire was comforting. Light was still coming through the hemlocks, but I'd had a busy day so after a light snack I crawled into my sleeping bag and was soon out.

When I woke a couple hours later, I crawled out of my bag and lit a candle on the table and noticed my water bottle on the other end of the table was frozen solid in spite of a layer of glowing embers in the stove. I looked at my tiny thermometer hanging off the back of my backpack, it read 5 degrees. I crawled back into my warm sleeping bag with my frozen water bottle, keeping it inside my sweatshirt to thaw.

Sometime around midnight, I woke again and looking out the window could see rays of light streaming through gaps between the hemlock branches lighting the snow beneath. I don't know what madness possessed me, but I got out of my warm sleeping bag, took off my booties, put on my shoes and headed out the door. I was all ready fully dressed so I just adjusted my scarf to protect my nose and chin as I walked very slowly back towards Bear Mountain and the Ravine. As I left the cover of the hemlocks, I entered a brilliant yellow wonderland. To the left down the steep bank the ripples in the brook sparkled as they danced their way downstream. The howling wind created little snow-devils and the trees cracked from the cold and creaked as they swayed in the wind. I found myself at the top of the trail leading into the Ravine I'd had such trouble going down and even more coming up it. I hesitated for a second but was soon slip-sliding my way, tree to tree, root to root, breaking my momentum until I reached a point where the grade eased and there was snow instead of ice. Not knowing how much trouble I'd have going back up worried me a little, but I was happy to be in the Ravine. The stream so clear and clean with its shards of ledges lining its bottom, their sharp angles looking almost manufactured. Navigating the areas where the ledge rose and fell with icy rivulets crossing from the steep sided ravine was still tricky even though I had done them earlier. It was all worth it because the deep pools with their falls were transparent, except for the bubbles where the falls plunged into them. The wind here blocked by the steep, heavily forested sides, was still very audible but muted and pleasant to my ears. After the ledged pools the stream flattens out and is strewn with boulders and the north bank flattens out with tall trees growing very close to the edge of the stream, their shadows creating stripes of clear, then black water. At the point where the trail crosses the stream, I headed back upstream. On my way I found a blown-down branch. It was 9 feet long, light and strong, perfect to help me up the icy grade coming out of the ravine. It worked great using it to push against trees or roots to stop me from sliding back down the grade. It was still a difficult climb so I was quite relieved when the trail leveled off. The wind was still howling and snow blowing at the top and it was still very beautiful so I took my time walking back to the cabin. When I entered the cabin, I checked the thermometer hanging off my pack there. It read -6 degrees. I pulled my water bottle from under my shirt, had a quick swig, took off my shoes, put on my booties, crawled into my sleeping bag and drifted off.

"Before I continue with this hike, I must explain that this middle of the night foray was to become a precursor to five more over a period of 6 or 7 years. The hikes themselves started at different places, ended at different places, and were of different durations. The constant was the midnight trip into Sage's Ravine in the moonlight. The temperature, winds and snow depth were very close to that first one. The one difference I can think of was much less ice than the first trip making it easier to go down into and back out of the ravine."

I woke up much later than usual because of my midnight romp, but it was just as well because of the rising temperature. It was still 10 degrees when I woke up at 8:30 but by the time I ate and packed up an hour later it was up to 18 degrees and rising. I headed west towards Riga Road and the unmarked trail to Mount Frissell. I had been there only once before so finding the entrance off Riga Road was somewhat difficult but not as difficult as staying on it covered by a heavy layer of snow. By the time I got to the base of Frissell, it had warmed up considerably and as I slogged through the foot and a half of snow to the peak, I found myself breaking into a light sweat. The views from Frissell, though pretty, were not that spectacular so I decided to keep

walking west towards the point where the trail I was on intersected with the Taconic Trail. At the vista there, you overlook Columbia County, N.Y. It was less than a mile and the view below definitely worth the effort. It was clear by then so the valley and hills on the other side were sharp but the mountains beyond and farther to the west faded gradually into vagueness.

At that point, I toyed with hiking towards Brace Mountain but since I was already tiring, I thought it might be prudent to double back on my trail to the bottom of Bear Mountain and Paradise Lane Trail which intersects with Undermountain Trail about 2 miles above the parking lot. I'd end up with around 16 miles which is a lot under those conditions. The trail was a little easier hiking in my tracks but by the time I reached Riga Road I began to wonder if I could reach the parking lot before dark. It was already midafternoon and I still had 9 miles of snowy trail ahead. The going was easy for a quarter of a mile in the open area near the intersection of the Appalachian Trail because the wind had ground and packed the snow enough, but as I approached the treed area on Paradise Lane as it circled Bear Mountain, the snow was soft again, slowing my progress. Paradise Lane itself was quite pretty as it wove its way around boulders and over rills. The wind had cleared a marsh of most of its snow and clumps of sedge and low blueberry bushes poked through tiny drifts that had collected around them. I stopped briefly to enjoy the scene before me but knowing how quickly dark would come in the trees on the lower elevations, I reluctantly moved on. Earlier it had been warm enough to slightly melt the snow, making the rocks underneath very slippery and I was frustrated with my slow progress until I reached Undermountain Trail. The sun was now gone, but knowing there was only 2 miles left, I breathed a sigh of relief. At that point, Undermountain Trail is wide and open but as I approached the part where it winds its way through the trees, dusk was upon me. By the time I got within a quarter mile from the parking lot, it was already dark but having done that trail so many times before, I was able to make it to the parking lot without my flashlight.

I jumped into my truck after stowing my pack in the body, leaving the parking lot and entering Route 41, my mind filled with flashbacks of the wind, blowing snow, and reflections of the moon on the stream in Sages Ravine, making the hour drive seem short. When I did arrive home, I was starved so I made myself bacon and eggs to eat while relating details of my hike to Pat. Later, sleep came easy in the comfort of a warm bed.

LIONS HEAD

This hike started at the Appalachian Trail parking lot just north of Salisbury in early January. I picked that starting point simply because I hadn't done that section of the A.T. for a few years. The parking lot itself is on a side hill so the trail north immediately rises gently then steepens as it nears Lions Head two miles in. The trail was hard packed and icy for those two miles from day hikers visiting Lions Head for its views. Lions Head is just a modestly high knob of ledge that presents good views. After Lions Head, the tracks of day hikers stopped and the 8 or 9 inches of snow that covered it made it less slippery and more pleasing to the eye. It's funny, but animal or

even a single human track that has been partially filled with blowing snow does not detract from winter's beauty in my mind, but a packed trail of many human feet does. Riga Shelter being less than a mile from Lions Head came quickly, so in spite of getting to the trailhead at mid afternoon there was still plenty of daylight left, so I thought of going on to Bond, but Riga Shelter is open to moon or starlight so I stayed. Since I had time, I even made a small fire in front of the shelter more for entertainment than any practical purpose, then I crawled into my sleeping bag facing the open side of the shelter with its view and the fire. By this time it was already dusk and I was soon asleep. When I awoke to relieve myself, the starlight had faintly lit up the valley below with its sparsely scattered homes, so I lingered, not wanting to break the spell it had on me until I felt the cold biting through my down jacket. I shined my light on the thermometer hanging from my back pack; it read minus 3 degrees. I grabbed my sleeping bag from the back of the shelter and laid it along the front edge and crawled in, then slung my legs over the side and propped my back against a support post. Now fully inside the sleeping bag, I could enjoy the scene before me in comfort. I felt so alive, my mind filled with many scenes from past hikes, but a particular one stood out.

It happened on one of my thru hikes on the Appalachian Trail. It was around one p.m. and I had already hiked 22 miles from Damascus, Va. I had just had some snacks on the ledges that jut up in the field just before the road in White Top. White Top is just a very old settlement with a tiny white clapboard church and a few scattered houses. For some reason, I got the urge to walk down the road to get a view to the east and after about an eighth mile, the road dipped steeply and I got my view. While I was enjoying this view, my senses detected something in the air, and I thought, "Oh shit, we've got a hell of a storm coming." Knowing I had two miles to get to Deep Gap Shelter, there was no time to waste. Whenever I wanted to cover ground I could hike at 4 miles per hour even in the mountains, so I figured I had a shot at making it in time. It wasn't that I was afraid of rain; I'd probably hiked a couple thousand miles in the rain through the years, but when the wind and rain are intense enough, with almost no visibility, even the most experienced hikers find it difficult to deal with. When I crossed and entered the field on the far side of VA. 600 the gusts of wind came but no drops yet. I stopped and put on my poncho, covered my pack, threw it back on, and headed down the trail at a full run. The rain now started as a few very large drops but I was covering a lot of ground when the shelter appeared 300 yards ahead. The wind by this time had popped all the snaps on my poncho and it billowed up around and behind me held on by my pack and its straps. The skies opened up dumping so much water on me, I was inhaling it with every breath and could see little but a vague dark form in the green background of grass and trees. I know I ran those last yards in less than four minutes (I'd been timed at 4 minutes 50 seconds in the first mile of a 7 mile road race) but there wasn't an inch of my body that wasn't soaked. I felt like I'd fallen into rather than ran through water. At the shelter when I arrived were the smiling/laughing faces of Tar Heels, a retired teacher and his son from North Carolina. I'd been running into them since Albert Mountain 100 miles back. Their daily mileage was similar to mine and we'd met often enjoying each other's company. "You looked like Mary Poppins out there, I even thought you were going airborne a couple of times" Tar Heels said. As I hung my pack on a peg he told me to dig out my cup; he'd boiled up water for hot chocolate when he saw me coming. While I towed off and put on a dry T shirt, I was introduced to the other three hikers that were there. Having lost a lot of body heat by this time, I put on a sweatshirt and pulled my sleeping bag up around me while we

chatted and listened to the storm. After a half hour or so, the rain stopped abruptly followed by bright sunlight. At this point a couple appeared looking like drowned rats. (Deep Gap Shelter held only 6 hikers comfortably at that time). I looked at those two sorry, sodden souls, then out at the bright sunlight, jumped out of my sleeping bag and began packing, announcing, "I'm going on up to Wilburn Ridge." A couple seconds later, Tar Heels asked if he and his son could tag along. I could see the relief on the faces of the two wet hikers knowing there would now be plenty of space for them. When the three of us got our gear together and our packs on, the couple knowing why we were going came out of the shelter and thanked us. We chatted for a few minutes and it turns out that they were from Switzerland. It was a strange chat because they spoke only a few words of English and we spoke no German, French, or Italian but they let us know they were grateful for the shelter space. After leaving the open area near the shelter, the trail winds its way through boulders and ledges, the sides thickly covered with bushes and small trees still dripping from the storm. The sun was still high enough to dry up the ground and stones, making them steam. As we gained elevation and the sun got lower in the sky, it cooled and became less jungle-like. At about 4 miles along, the trail turned between the mountain and the sun and cool breezes wafted through our twisting path. Like magic, deer seemed to pop up at every turn. By the time we reached Wilburn Ridge the sun was already low in the sky, as we headed down the ridge, long shadows of the trees, bushes, and boulders appeared on the rugged terrain below. We found a fairly flat grassy spot next to a large piece of ledge rising above the scrub. By the time we set up our tents on the still wet ground, lights were coming on in the valley below and it was getting cooler. After putting on a sweatshirt, getting some snacks out of my food bag and hoisting it up on the branch of a nearby pine, I climbed that tall piece of ledge with my snacks. Tar Heels and son followed me and the 3 of us ate as we peered into the now dark valley below. At first there were only a few stars visible but as it darkened, new points of light appeared both in the sky and in the valley below as people turned on their lights. Suddenly, my wonderful flashback of that night in Virginia ended with a pain in my right cheek from sitting too long on it, leaning on the support post. The scene there from Riga Shelter equaled that night in Virginia but the valley much smaller and the temperature 70 degrees cooler. There was a stiff breeze now and trunks and branches of trees squeaked and groaned against each other while the breeze sang softly as it blew through them. It was still magical there so I wanted to stay but between my sore butt and now a very cold nose, I decided to give up and head towards my sleeping pad and bagged tent that I used for a pillow at the back of the shelter. All zipped up in my warm bag, I didn't want to unzip and let in cold air so with difficulty I rolled myself diagonally to the pad but ended up unzipping down to my arms to get myself comfortable. I looked at the thermometer hanging off my pack next to me; it read zero. After pulling up the sleeping bag, I warmed up quickly and was soon asleep. I woke up at first light as usual, looked at the thermometer, and pulled the sleeping bag back over my head. It was -5 degrees. After a half hour or so, I propped myself against the back wall of the shelter, drank some water, and slowly gnawed a bagel, killing time until I was ready to face the cold. Being already dressed, I unzipped my bag and very quickly threw on my shoes and packed up losing very little body heat in the process. The trail for the first mile as far as Bond Shelter was 9 inches of untracked snow making it very easy, but from that point on, icy and a little bit difficult. Since I seldom actually plan out my hikes ahead, I was thinking about my destination for the day when I spotted Bear Mountain Road heading west at the bottom of the

mountain. I had never been on it but reasoned it had to intersect Riga Road (East Street). By this time I was excited with the route I came up with. I planned to go west over Round and Frissell Mountains and eventually to the Taconic Trail in Columbia County, N.Y.; from there, to Brace and South Brace Mountains. Memories of a hawk hovering almost motionless 300 yards from me as if suspended there by some invisible filament, only the feathers on the tips of his wings keeping him stable in the stiff mountain winds flooded my mind. After a mile and a half, I came to Riga Road and just north on it was the trail to Frissell. The hiking was easy in just 9 inches of snow, and I was soon over Round and Frissell and at the intersection of the Taconic Trail. At that point I turned south 1/8 of a mile to Brace. The view of the farmland below, the distant highway and the more distant mountains faded into a blurry nothingness in the anemic winter sunlight. For some reason it sent a chill through my body. As I hiked towards south Brace, the wind had blown the snow off the mountain side down to the roots of the grasses in some places and created drifts in others. It looked so different than it had on a late fall hike I'd taken.

On that day, hawks and turkey buzzards soared in different parts of the sky and the fields were either green grass or brown where the corn had been harvested. It was exceptionally windy; in fact I had opted against setting up my tent on a grassy flat near the top of South Brace because of it, deciding instead on the leeward side of Brace where the wind couldn't get to it. The site wasn't exactly level and it was difficult to stake the tent because the layer of soil on the ledge beneath was very thin, but I was able to secure the tent with a little extra effort. I had chosen the site partly because it was just 15 feet below the ridge and within 100 feet where cubed ledges rose from the grassy, stony mountainside. They were just perfect for sitting and gazing out over the valley below. I also thought I might build a small fire in back of them, but when I tried to light it, I found the wind created such a vacuum that matches would just flare and go out. I quickly decided I didn't need any hot soup anyway and just sat there enjoying the sound of the wind and the scene below while munching on a bagel. I sat there a long time because my seat on the ledge was very comfortable. The way the ledge was formed even created a back rest for me. As the sun got low and the temperature dropped, I finally got up enough ambition to go to my tent and warm sleeping bag. After zipping up my tent and sleeping bag, I just laid there all snug and warm listening to wind whistling over the ridge and watching the sides of the tent billowing out from the vacuum the wind created. It must have lulled me to sleep because when the urge to go came, it was dark but not pitch dark because of the stars. After relieving myself, I walked to the top of the ridge and found the west side of the mountain to be starlit so I walked to the ledge and sat. I could now occasionally see headlights on the distant highway and the star light was bright enough to make faint shadows of trees and rocks. After 15 or 20 minutes, I'd had enough so I went back to the tent and slept till morning. Waking quite early, I headed to South Brace, then Riga Lake 1 ¼ mile away. It was well worth the effort. Even before the lake came into view, I entered a misty wonder world as the trees opened up, the edge of the lake with its clumps of cattails, floating deadfalls, then sharp edged blocks of glacial granite appeared. As I walked south towards the midpoint of the lake, I could see the few very large houses near the opposite shore. They seemed to be suspended in the mist like castles in the sky. It was definitely the high point of that autumn hike.

Getting back to my winter hike—by this time it was midafternoon and the cabin just past Alander Mountain was 4 miles away. While much of it was easy hiking, Alander was a bit of a climb so I thought it was prudent to get going. The trip was made

pleasant by my recognizing landmarks along the way. It was probably a good thing I was familiar, because in winter with drifted snow on it, it would be easy to stray off trail. Knowing there wouldn't be much opportunity to collect fallen branches near the cabin (it was always picked bare nearby) I had been grabbing any I found for the last mile. I found a couple large ones, one a little on the green side, and both difficult to break or burn but since there was little else what I'd collected would have to do. I didn't really need a fire but the cabin had only two small windows and was dark inside even in the day; I wanted one just to keep my spirit buoyed up. I arrived at the cabin at dusk so there was just enough time to shed my pack for a quick foray of the nearby woods for some more branches. I was able to gather a large armful which I took back to the cabin and carefully teepeed in the stove, then went back outside to break up the large branches I had dragged in from the trail. I had pretty good success but the green branch was difficult to snap all the way through so I just bent them instead. I brought them in whatever length I could, knowing I could fold them up and jam them into the stove when the fire was going. By this time it was pitch black both inside and out. I lit the stove and spent the next half hour slowly feeding it until I was able to cram in the green stuff. There was no damper on the chimney so I knew the fire wouldn't last long, but the embers glowing through the slots in the door of the stove were comforting as I lay there in the inky blackness. I could feel drafts on my face coming from all directions. Unlike Northwest Cabin's tight log construction, this one was frame and board, old and rickety, but it made little difference to me as I snuggled in my warm sleeping bag. Sometime around midnight, I woke up with a very urgent pee call, and groped around for my light with no success. I finally raced to where I thought the door was. Well, it wasn't. But after frantically feeling my way along the wall until I found it, I burst through with just a dribble before I was able to get it out. When finished, I took a few steps but it wasn't too much lighter out there than in the cabin. I could see vague outlines against the white of the snow but that was all so I went quickly back into the cabin. As usual, after hiking, my calf muscles were sore and needing to be stretched, so I felt my way along the wall until I had a stud in each hand, then positioned my feet away from the wall and slowly leaned towards it. After staying in this position for a few minutes, the tightness gone, somehow I found my way to my sleeping bag and was soon asleep. When I woke, the windows were dimly lit so I knew it was still early. I lay there thinking about where I was going to hike that day. I came up with a plan to hike north to Bash Bish Falls, then road walk up Falls Road to West Street and south to Cross Road that intersected with East Street. From there it's only a short distance to the Mount Everette Reservation. The plan excited me as I had never been to Bish Bash Falls from the trail. Pat and I had driven there a couple times and enjoyed them. I'd hiked through the reservation a number of times on the Appalachian Trail and loved both Guilder Pond and Mount Everette. One late fall day I tented on the east side of Guilder and both swam and fished in it. The shore there is ledge, 8 feet high above the water, but is stepped in places allowing easy access. The water was crystal clear and four feet deep with grasses growing thinly on the bottom. I swam around for a while, than waded toward shore when I noticed small perch darting out of the grasses. Since I always carry a short length of fishing line along with some hooks, I got out of the water and hunted for worms under damp leaves, logs, and stones in the woods nearby, then cut a very thin maple sapling for a pole. I felt just like a 10 year old again as I looped about 7 feet of the line to the end of the pole, winding up the excess. Since I had fished this way when I was a boy, it was easy to flick my baited line out 12 feet into the grasses. Almost immediately I had a flopping 5 inch perch at my

feet from the same area I'd been swimming in less than an hour earlier. After releasing it I rebaited and threw my line out again with similar results. I caught and released a dozen or so until I'd had my fill of it and just sat on the ledge enjoying the autumn colors and breezes.

My plan made for the day, it was time to get up and going, so I threw on my shoes, rolled up my sleeping pad and stuffed my sleeping bag into its sack. After putting it all into my pack, I looked around the cabin and thought it had served me well in spite of its condition. Before I threw on my pack, I checked the thermometer hanging from it; it was 16 degrees. I had never been on this section of the trail before and there were no tracks so I was careful not to stray off it. When I got to Bash Bish Brook, 35 feet of 18 inch deep water lay before me. Now I walked through water in the middle of winter many times and just kept walking after with very little ill effect but now it was only 16 degrees out and the water would be up to my knees in spots with slippery rocks underneath. I searched both up and down stream until I found what I was looking for. It was an old dead tree that had fallen across the brook and was hanging there three feet above the water but covered with a half inch of ice. It scared the hell out of me, but the alternative was worse. I straddled it, pushing myself forward while leaning slightly towards the right where I had my walking stick in that hand probing the bottom of the brook and keeping me from sliding to that side. It was touch and go, especially when I ran into a couple of branches to go over, but ever so slowly I made the far bank. When I straightened up there, I found myself shaking, my forehead covered with sweat. Bash Bish Falls was worth it as it shot way out at the top landing with a thunderous roar as it boiled and bubbled its way out of the pool at the bottom. The spray was reaching me 100 yards downstream. After a while, I climbed a steep trail up to Falls Road and then to the top of the falls. Looking down from the high point near the parking lot into the boiling cauldron at high water is an experience. Finally, after breaking the spell it had on me, I headed up Falls Road to West Road and south to where Cross intersects with East Road near a tiny picturesque church. The entrance to Mount Everette is visible to the right (north) at that point. The total distance of this zigzag route from the falls is only a couple miles so my guess is when I arrived at the gate it was around 9 a.m. There were lots of icy tire tracks where people had parked in the unplowed area near the gate, then lots of icy footprints on the unplowed road. They were both difficult to walk in. Most of the tracks ended at Guilder Pond a half mile in and the walking became much easier. There the Appalachian Trail crosses the road and rises south to the top of Everette and the fire tower there (now removed) which I climbed in spite of the warning signs. I found it quite exciting to climb that rickety framework and gaze out at the landscape below and as long as nobody was around, what was the harm. By this time I had decided to keep heading south on the Appalachian Trail to Race Mountain and eventually Sages Ravine. It was one of my favorite sections of trail because of the quarter mile walk on Race Mountain with its sheer drop off to the east. I had done many day hikes up Undermountain Trail, over Bear Mountain, down into Sages Ravine and over to Race Mountain, then down Racebrook Falls to Route 41 and roadwalked back to my truck at Undermountain. It was an all day, very rugged hike but the rewards in sheer beauty were great. So great, in fact, that I did that all day hike at least a half dozen times a year in all seasons, sometimes starting at Undermountain Trail and other times starting at Race Mountain Trail and hiking south. In spring through fall, it was common to have turkey vultures riding the air currents at my level as I walked that quarter mile of ledge on Race Mountain. Race Brook Falls could be spectacular at any time of the year. In

the winter, the ice formations took my breath away. In the spring the snow melt turned the falls into a graceful misty siren that murmured softly as its falls hit the mossy almost vertical ledges on its way down. I would often find foot holds where I would be near enough to feel its icy spray on my face. In summer, I often showered in it, standing in basins in the ledge created by its falling waters. The view from the trail on Race Mountain that is open to the east and partially to both north and south rivals any I've seen, and I've seen many on my over 25,000 miles of backpacking. Even the four mile road walk on Route 41 back to the parking lot excited me as I passed the well manicured gentleman farms I'd admired from above.

After leaving the tower on Mt. Everette, the hiking became a little more difficult as the snowy trail writhed its way towards Race Mountain. It was around noon when I arrived there, so I found a spot where the wind had cleared a piece of ledge for me to sit on while I ate and enjoyed the view of Twin Lakes, the farms below, and the Berkshires to the north. While I was doing this, I thought about my next move. I had already decided to go into Sages Ravine but hadn't planned anything else. It had been a rewarding hike and I thought it might be time for some real home cooked food so I decided when I left the Ravine I'd go out Paradise Lane. By the position of the sun I figured it was almost one and with only 6 miles left, I might, with the drive home make it in time for supper. While I sat on the ledge eating it had been sunny but as I hiked my way towards the Ravine, the sun disappeared and by the time I reached it I could feel a drop in temperature and the unusually light breeze I'd been hiking in turned into a stiff wind. Usually any abrupt change in the weather would concern me, but for some reason this one left me very relaxed and I poked along, stopping at every pool, enjoying their beauty. When I finally got out of the Ravine and neared Paradise Lane Trail, I just suddenly felt the urge to go over Bear Mountain. It would only be a mile more and there was plenty of daylight left. My urge to climb that steep, snowy trail in mid afternoon was unusual even for me, but I chugged around the mountain switchback and then the steep part and was soon on top. When I arrived at the open area near the monument I was surprised to find it almost cleared of snow by the wind. The trail, as it descends on the south side of the mountain, is in kind of a gully with ledges rising 12 or 15 feet on the right and bushes and stunted trees on the left. The ledges were completely bare. Some of the snow had settled in the depression of the trail but most ended up in 18 inch drifts on the left side of the trail. Around each tree trunk was an opening in the snow the shape of an inverted goblet all the way down to bare earth, the tree trunk acting as the stem. Even around the few boulders there, the wind had somehow created cantilevered circles, the unsupported tops of which ended very sharply, seeming to defy gravity. I had seen cantilevered drifts before and even had one form off the eaves at the peak of our house 7 or 8 feet out, but these seemed alien. I spent a half hour there, part of it looking at them and part of it was up on the ledges that presented a 180 degree view of the distant mountainside. When I did leave, my mind was so filled with the puzzle of how these eerie things were made, I found myself at my turn onto Undermountain Trail seemingly with no effort. I stopped at the spring I love there and drank directly from it, enjoying its iciness. The last mile and a half went quickly as my thoughts went back to the hike. It had been a good one and there would be lots to relate to Pat.

This next hike I'm about to write about took place later in the season, somewhere around the middle of March. It hadn't been a very snowy winter; in fact, as I drove up to the trail I could see bare spots in some of the fields at lower elevations. When I arrived at the parking lot for Undermountain Trail around 9 a.m. it was sunny and in

the mid 20's, perfect hiking weather. Normally I don't plan out my hikes ahead; instead, I just go to a starting point and figure it out while I'm hiking, but on this particular hike I had planned to go up Undermountain Trail, onto the Appalachian, over Bear to Sages Ravine and north as far as the intersection with Race Brook Trail and head east towards the falls. There was a spot on the north bank of Race Brook that I'd been eyeing for years and while I had no plan for the next day, that was where I was going to camp for that night. By the time I got to the steeper part of Undermountain I was puffing pretty good and thinking that in spite of my walking 7 or 8 miles a day at home, I was a little out of shape. I felt like taking a little break, but pushed myself along until I reached the spring that crosses the trail just before the Appalachian where I always stop. While stopped there drinking water, I noticed a few stray snowflakes but thought nothing of it because it's a fairly common occurrence and usually doesn't lead to anything. After a few minutes, I threw on my pack and headed towards the Appalachian Trail an eighth mile away. By the time I got there it was a steady light snow and by the time I got to the bottom of Bear Mountain, it was snowing heavily. Thinking it was just a passing squall, I kept slogging along. In the 10 or 15 minutes it took to get to the top, there was already over an inch on the ground. As I peered at the trail down the mountain through the blinding snow, a little doubt came into my mind, but I plunged ahead anyway, reasoning that Race Brook Falls was only 8 or 9 miles away. If I had any problem with that, I could always tent at Bear Rock Falls only 4 miles down the trail. Now relaxed with the situation I began enjoying my hike through the Ravine. The snow was adding another element to the beauty around me. By the time I reached Bear Rock Falls, there was 4 inches of snow on the ground which presented little problem. When I approached Race Mountain a mile and a half later, I became concerned, not because of the snow on the trail but because the falling snow was blinding and I was afraid of the area that skirts the ledged drop-offs so I went off trail to the edge of the scrub, well away from the cliffs until I felt it was safe to get back to the trail. It sounds easy enough, but between drifts of old snow beneath and now 5 inches of new snow on top, it was a slow process. Once I was back on the trail it was easier and since I had only a couple more miles to get to my planned campsite, I relaxed. When I got to where the trail runs along Race Brook, hemlocks and pines protected me from the snow in spots and I was soon at the base of the large pine where I'd planned to camp. It was as I figured, almost bare of snow close to the trunk. I cleared off what snow was there down to the pine needles below and set up my tent. After filling up my water bottles at the brook 100 feet away, I took a quick trip to the top of the falls 100 yards downstream. There wasn't much to see except snow so I headed back to the tent. I had picked that spot well as both the ground and pine needles were soft and I was soon asleep. All that dealing with the snowstorm must have exhausted me because except for one quick pee call, I slept till it was very light out. I looked at the thermometer—it was 35 degrees in the tent. Of course, with the heat of my warm breath in that tiny tent, I expected it to be warmer than the outside but not that warm. Because I had slept so well, I was raring to go so I knocked the snow off the tent from the inside and soon had it, along with my sleeping bag, packed and ready to go. As I trudged towards the Appalachian Trail a little over a half mile away I found myself sweating so when I reached it, I removed my sweatshirt and left my down ski jacket open the rest of the way to Mt. Everette. By the time I got there, I had my hike for the day planned. I was going to walk out the park road to East Street which merged with West Street in a couple of miles. A mile later the Taconic Trail crosses West Street and I thought I'd hike south on it until Bash Bish Brook as I'd never

done that section of the Taconic before. After it crosses the brook it follows the brook upstream to the falls and then south to Alander Mountain and the cabin. It would be a 12 mile hike, 10 of which would be on a snowy trail, the other 2 on plowed roadway. I thought it would be perfect for a nice easy day.

As I headed down the park road towards East Street in bright sunlight, I could already feel a balmy breeze on my cheeks and later as I headed down East Street, I found I had to remove my down ski jacket and replace it with my sweatshirt. It was so pleasant feeling the hot sun through my shirt and the light breeze on my face. It was such easy walking and I love the few country homes with their wood piles and old rustic style. The temperature must have gone up to the 50's, I even had to stop and filter some water from the ditch carry melt water at the roadside because of my thirst. The downside of the warm day was the melting snow as I headed south on the Taconic Trail.