

## I Wouldn't Change a Thing

in the corner. But, some of us were grateful for their ignorance; time was clearly beginning to run out for Joe, and those who appreciated what he had meant for the mountains, the club, and for ourselves were anxious to make the most of whatever opportunities we could.

"That's five times I've beaten your ass, Lou, and that ought to be enough for one day." Joe turned from Lou Bissell and the cribbage board; "Got any good booze for his party, Willie, or are you mooching again?"

I assured him that I would provide my share if he could stand Laphroaig.

"Well, around here people seem to specialize in anything that contains sufficient alcohol, so if that's what you're offering to poison us with, I guess I'll try to choke down my share."

With that, I went down to my car and returned in a few minutes producing the appropriate container from my parka and offered it around. It's remarkable how many friends one suddenly has under such circumstances.

"Joe," I asked, "you've met a ton of people going through these hills, and the Hut System; of them all, which would be your favorite hiking partner, if you could do it again?"

He thought a minute. "Uncle Harry Pierce Nichols, from Salem; there was a great man; probably the most inspiring person I've ever known. He never let up on climbing, until the day he died, and he really cared about people, too, young and old alike, but mostly the young. Even after he was gone, his Christmas cards were sent out with his own special greeting; he'd already prepared 'em. My children loved him, and he would take 'em up to the Crystal Cascade if he was visiting in the Notch. When they were about five or six, and he was maybe eighty years older, they traveled at about the same speed. He spent a lot of time at the Ravine House, then later he had a place in Intervale.

"Dr. Nichols was a priest, Episcopalian, and he lived in New York, where he was rector of the famous Holy Trinity Church. But his heart was in the mountains, and he climbed all the time, everywhere. He'd even been in those Selkirk Mountains, where you're always going, Willie. Once he told me that he'd gone out there with a bunch of his friends, back in 1893, and they went out on a two-day climb, but it turned into a three-day climb, and when they finally got back to the Glacier House hotel, he washed up and preached a sermon that evening — on 'The Glory of Aspiration.'

"When he retired, in 1922, he came up here to live, and it was just when I came to work for the AMC. Now, you guys think I'm a pretty irreverent sonofabitch; and I guess you're part right. But Uncle Harry got my at-



*The Mayor of Porky Gulch takes a break from umpiring the "brawl game" at an earlier spring hutmen's reunion.*

tention about the hereafter, and I've stayed close to him, even though he's been dead for over thirty years. He showed me how to lay out a trail; he got me married nice and proper; he baptized my kids; and the church he preached in up here is where you guys will see the last of me; I've been a vestryman there for over twenty years. A great mountaineer, but more than that he was a great man. I went up through Tuckerman's with him over the Labor Day weekend in 1935; I had to go over to help close the Lakes, but he went on up to the Summit, and then back down to Pinkham that evening. Eighty-five years old, he was, that very day. You guys will have to go some to match him.

"One day, Uncle Harry got to telling a bunch of us younger guys about the famous blizzard of '88. It was in March, and he was visiting some friends in New York. His family was living in the Boston area at the time, and Harry was supposed to be coming home when the blizzard struck. Everything in the Northeast stopped; no trains ran, families were separated and three feet of snow covered everything, with drifts over twenty feet in places. It must have been one helluva good storm; too bad we don't get a few of those for the skiers these days. So he wanted to get word to his family that he was going to stay over in New York until things straightened out a bit, but, of course, all the wires were down, and some stayed that way for weeks. So he sent a cable from New York to a friend in London and asked them to send another cable to the family in Boston. It got through and everyone relaxed."

"How come," I asked, "you call him Uncle Harry? He wasn't any sort of relative, was he?"

"Oh, Hell no; but everyone called him Uncle Harry around these mountains. He'd climbed in the Alps with Teddy Roosevelt; that was the Republican Roosevelt, and he said he'd been to the top of Mount Washington two hundred and fifty times. One time, Uncle Harry told me he had climbed up Mount Adams, back about 1880. It was his first trip up there, over Lowe's Path. So, when he got to the top, in the late morning, there was this little old lady already up there sitting on a rock. Dr. Nichols asked if there was anything they could do for her, as he and his friends were going on to Mount Washington. 'Oh, no,' she said; 'I was supposed to meet a lady from Boston here at ten o'clock; she's a little late.' That was Mrs. Lucia Pychowska, who used to come up here from New Jersey every summer with her daughter, Marian. Those two ladies hiked all over the mountains here, back before I was born, and so did Uncle Harry."

"Joe," I interrupted, "as I recall, Dr. Nichols was also elected president

of the American Alpine Club after he retired from active life as a clergyman, so I know a little bit about him and I'm prepared to agree that he was a great mountaineer; but why do you have such nice things to say about a Harvard man?"

"Well, that place used to turn out some great men, but I guess it began to slip about the time you went there." Realizing this trend of thought could get out of hand, I inquired if there were any other people for whom he felt a special bond.

"It's pretty hard for me to try making up a goddam list of special friends; I've known a lot of great people in my life up here. Some of them are around this cabin, right now, but it wouldn't be smart for me to name just a few, there's too many."

"Let me put it the other way, then, Joe," I offered: "Do you have any big regrets, serious disappointments over the fifty years you've been in these hills?"

Joe scratched his chin and took a nip at the Laphroaig. "Christ, Willie, that's mighty tasty stuff, but you've asked a pretty delicate question there, too. I guess it's no secret that I've felt a little out of sorts with the AMC. I didn't want to retire, even though they ended up writing me a fair enough ticket. But, it hurt, and in a way, it still does, even though I've come to accept that the times have changed a lot, and maybe I wasn't right for that job anymore.

"I still like to think of the Hut System as it was when I came up here as a youngster. Later, when I started working at Porky Gulch, the first thing I did was to put a roof over an outdoor washstand, and everyone was real happy about that job. It was a great advance for civilization at Porky Gulch, too. That was the way I liked to do things, with my own hands, and out of whatever materials we had around. Now they've got all kinds of building codes, committees, architects, regulations, restrictions, reviews, wardens, inspectors. Hell's bells and little pussycats! An honest man can't do a damned thing on his own anymore. Don't get me warmed up on that subject.

"I must be losing my grip, though, 'cause when I was up on the Summit a while back, there were a bunch of kids packing down to the Lakes. They didn't know me from a dozen others standing around, so I commenced to kid 'em a bit: 'Where you going with those big loads? . . . You don't say? . . . You mean you're going all the way down there with that on your back? . . . People really live up here? . . . ' I had 'em figuring me for the finest goofer ever. They were a grubby bunch, though, long hair and half-assed beards; all but one. He looked pretty human and I decided