

## **A Walk in the Woods - March 1, 2011**

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I took a hike this past fall along the Benton trail, up the northwestern shoulder of Mount Moosilauke. As I approached the summit a strong wind was roaring out of the south-west stinging my face and bringing tears to my eyes. The day was crystal clear and there was not a cloud in the sky. Fortunately for me there was not a soul in sight. The solitude of the mountains is humbling, but of course I am never alone. Charging over the rocks of the mountains and through the trees in the forest there will always be a black lab in my life.



From the barren summit the view was incredible. To the north and east are the Kinsman and Franconia ridgelines. To the south is the Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest. As I look west I see Mt. Clough, Blueberry, Jeffers, Sugarloaf and Black Mountains and beyond that the Connecticut River valley and North Haverhill.

There was a time when all of this scenery around me was considered “the lands nobody wanted”. The hillsides were stripped of trees through indiscriminant logging by the lumber barons and sparks from logging railroads started many fires, scorching thousands of acres that I now looked at. Exactly 100 years ago on March 1, 1911 President William Howard Taft signed into law The Weeks Act, giving the federal government the authority to purchase these lands, and thus, the White Mountains National Forest was born.

By 1908, the rabid efforts of President Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot to protect the nation’s forests and rivers from over-logging and development were taking slow effect. Heavy floods were causing severe erosion problems on the treeless landscape causing millions of dollars in damage. The floods and erosion were not only causing property damage but industries which were dependent on hydro power were suddenly realizing the need to protect forests in order to protect the nation’s water supplies.

Between 1905 and 1911 The Society For the Protection of New Hampshire’s Forests (110 years old this year), The Boone and Crockett Club, The Appalachian Mountain Club and other organizations lobbied Congress to craft a bill to protect these lands. Their savior came from an unexpected source; republican congressman John Wingate Weeks.

Weeks, a businessman and native of Lancaster, New Hampshire (one of the hometown boys) was upset by the damage that the logging, fires and floods were causing in his beloved White Mountains of New Hampshire. He was challenged by then Speaker of the House, Joseph Cannon, to “frame a forestry bill which you as a businessman, are willing to support”.

With support from the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire’s Forests and other groups, Weeks introduced a bill in 1908 proposing that the federal government purchase lands near the headwaters of navigable streams, recognizing the importance streams and rivers had to national commerce. After nearly three years of amendments and filibustering the Weeks Act was signed into law on March 1, 1911. The act gave the federal government the power to purchase private land in order to protect the headwaters of rivers and watersheds in the eastern United States and called for

fire protection efforts through federal, state and private cooperation. The Weeks Act led to the birth of the White Mountain National Forest and has protected nearly 20 million acres of national forest throughout the east.



As I descended Mount Moosilauke the sun was setting, creating long shadows in the last of the golden autumn light that absorbed me as I walked through the forest. Sometimes I worry about the future of our forests, but it is good to know I have history on my side.

This “Walk in the Woods” is dedicated in memory of Jewel, my four legged forest colleague. I don’t think the Weeks Act was written for dogs, but the old girl sure got a lot of mileage out of it in her 14 years. “May your spirit forever soar over the White Mountains of New Hampshire”.