

BAY-Hiking 7/17

HEADLINE: Straightback
Mountain: A Native
American Journey

1028 words

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This was one hike I was particularly looking forward to because I am absolutely fascinated by different cultures. This time I am hiking up Straightback Mountain with Paul Pouliot, Council Chief and Speaker for the Cowasuck Band of the Pennacook Abenaki People, and Denise Mehigan, treasurer of the band.

The morning was really clear and warm over the Fourth of July weekend when our rather large group gathered to begin our ascent up Straightback. There was myself, Paul, Denise, Don Watson - my hiking guide, and his two friends, Dave and Rick, Dave's daughter Emma, as well as Denny and Rex, our trail dogs for the trip. Upon the direction of Don we moved from the Mount Major parking lot, which was already quite busy at 9 a.m., and went over to the less-used Jesus Valley Road entrance.

We hit the trail about 9:30 a.m. and began our climb up the trail, starting out on very rocky terrain, and I knew that it would be very slow going on the way back down. This was a fleeting thought, because I was enthralled by what Paul was telling me about the Abenaki and the various plants and trees they used routinely. He explained how tree branches were intertwined to create wigwams and that when built

well, a 200-pound man could hang from the highest point. Fires were never built inside the wigwam, the Abenaki heated rocks on a fire built outside, then brought them into the dwelling to create ambient heat.

Leaves of the low-growing wintergreen plant were chewed for pleasure. I got to try some, and the flavor was just as good as anything put out by Wrigley's. It often goes past my notice when items I take for granted are taken from nature. Scientists extract the essence of this plant to be used in the gum we see in the convenience stores. Our group searched for animal signs and learned the Abenaki words for forest animals such as the moose, which are called moz in the Abenaki language.

We rested by a brook along the trail, and as we continued higher, we began to see that the blueberries, which are plentiful on Straightback, were ripe and ready for picking. We stopped to eat some along the trail while we enjoyed a lovely view of Gunstock Mountain in the distance. The berries were very sweet and much better than the ones in the grocery store, in my humble opinion. Paul explained that the Abenaki did not climb mountains for recreation, why would they? All that they needed was right near the valley, though he did admit they might come up here if they knew the berries were plentiful. The Abenaki never really left the area that they roamed, which was most of New England at one point in time, choosing instead to mostly integrate into local towns.

When we finally reached the summit we let out a cheer and took photos to document our feat, Denise said that she was very proud of herself for making it all the way to the top. We enjoyed the views and ate a lunch of sandwiches and crackers before continuing to pick blueberries. I myself managed not to bring any home - they were too good and I ate them all before we left the summit!

At the summit, Paul pulled out his own personal pipe, carried in a pouch. Putting together the stem and the bowl, he conducted a prayer ceremony asking for help for an ill friend. He explained that the smoke represents the rising of the prayers. He spoke in Abenaki, but explained that he was asking the creator to watch over their friend. He noted that the ceremonies of the Abenaki are not that much different than other practices, many of which use smoke from tobacco or incense in the same manner. I had never seen such a ceremony before and I felt very honored to be able to watch and take pictures, imagining the same thing happening thousands of years ago.

We spent a couple hours talking and picking blueberries before taking another trail down. It took Don a couple minutes to find the trail, which took us through the woods and streams and offered more opportunities to look at plant life. We found witch hazel, which can be used as an astringent and discussed the properties of different birch barks, and found that the soft underbelly of the tree bark can be eaten as well.

The trip down was pretty tiring and the loose rocks of the trail up haunted me when we reached it, teaching me never to leave my poles behind in the future. Paul and Denise detached a large shelf mushroom from a decomposing tree that they will use for carving. After being debugged, the fungus will be carved to create a scene. As the mushroom ages, the brown color of the cuts will contrast with the white meat of the mushroom and make the scene pop out to the eye.

We reached the end of the trail about 3 p.m., having hiked about six hard miles. It was a pretty difficult hike for me, but we did meet a family group on the way down with younger children who reached the bottom about the same time we did. This hike is certainly worth it for the views and blueberries along the way. It is well marked too, so there is little chance an observant person will get lost. Emma had a lot of fun looking for the orange trail blazes on the way down and managed to find newts and frogs for company on the way up. My only regret is that there is no way I can possibly fit all the history and interesting tidbits I learned from every one of my hiking buddies on this trip. I certainly learned a lot, and I can't wait to get some more of those delicious blueberries. I am already collecting recipes for my haul. If I can manage not to eat them all before I get them home. That will take more willpower than climbing the mountain.

CUTLINE (Hiking1)
PICKING BLUEBERRIES at the summit of Straightback

with the amazing view in the background, not a bad way to spend the weekend! (Danielle DeLisle – Gilford Steamer)

CUTLINE (Hiking2)
ENJOYING THE VIEW from the summit, notice the bag of blueberries Paul (far left) is holding. (Danielle DeLisle – Gilford Steamer)