



Helen Colyer Menz with daughter, Carolyn. Photo credit: Mary Colyer Dittmar

An Afternoon With Helen Menz

By Chuck Schwerin #942

Helen Colyer Menz #42 regarded me with curiosity from her lounge chair in the snug cottage she shares with her eldest daughter, Carolyn Douty #202, in Loudonville, New York. Carolyn and her sister, Sue Paden #562, had just met me at the door and asked if I'd like something to drink after my long drive.

A few weeks prior I had attended the newly-released Adirondack 46er Movie in Glens Falls and instantly fell in love with this woman whose disarming wit and arresting twinkle had stolen the show for me in Blake Cortright's film. Now 99, Helen is the 46ers' eldest living member and I decided to try to reach her to capture her stories about the early days of climbing in this special place. Record them for PEEKS, for her family, and for myself.

Her two daughters had propped her up comfortably in a soft chair to await my visit.

Her skin was nearly translucent and her gaze a bit hesitant as she sat, wondering if this interrogator was going to challenge her uncertain memory of adventures past. Sue and Carolyn watched protectively from the



Photo credit: Chuck Schwerin

dining room table as I set up my computer to memorialize the proceedings and searched for a way to earn their mother's trust.

"Helen, you and I both started on Marcy and we both finished on Allen so I guess we have something in common. I'd love to hear your hiking stories. Tell me about that hike up Allen in 1946. Did you party?" She beamed.

"No. We were too tired," she laughed, her pale eyes sparkling. "We were just glad we got it done." I recalled feeling the same way on my last steps up Allen twenty-seven years after she finished, thinking immediately about the eight-mile return. Helen believed they had slept out that night and turned to a fragile ledger in her lap, a logbook that held her notes from every climb she'd taken. "If I'd known I was going to last this long I'd have tried harder to keep a better log," she sighed, frustrated at her inability to find the entry for

her first ascent of Allen. The book deserved to be in the New York State Library, a worthy companion to the old summit registers that once resided within metal canisters on all the trailless peaks.

Sue and Carolyn came over to help her find the entry. Helen had logged the trips according to the height of each mountain and there were pages for every round; she'd completed nearly four. It was comical to watch the three of us, Carolyn, Sue and me, try to decipher her log. Helen regarded us bemusedly. "Allen is Number 26," she said, recalling the fact from some deep recess of her mind. I had to look it up and she was, of course, correct.

Carolyn finally located the entry. "September 13th, 1946," she read. "Slept in a barn at Tahawus. Long day. Made 46er top. Three months pregnant. With me," she added, parenthetically.

"I wish I'd done better," Helen said ruefully. "Oh, for God's sake, who would have thought I'd live to be this old?"

Helen Colyer grew up in Saranac Lake, and from an early age discovered she enjoyed climbing trees in the backyard more than playing with dolls. She and her younger sister, Mary Colyer Dittmar #29, often led her girlfriends on a merry chase.

"So you were the ringleaders?" I asked.

"Not only ringleaders, but tomboys. Once we went across the cemetery and climbed up into some tall pine trees on the other side of the railroad tracks with a bunch of girls and then they got scared and couldn't figure how to get down." She cackled as she recalled their panic. "Finally I hung down so somebody could stand on me and we managed to get them all down.

"Mary and I didn't play sports but we found out we could get a varsity letter from Saranac Lake High School if we climbed Marcy. We had a friend, Agnes Johnson, who was a Girl Scout leader and had done Marcy and the Dixes so we helped her with the girls and earned a badge and credit towards the letter."

The Colyer family left Saranac Lake after their father died, moving to Albany to be near relatives the year Mary graduated from high

school. It was Helen's nineteenth birthday, "the worst day of my life," she recalled. But the move away from the Adirondacks did not deter her from a lifelong passion of hiking that she passed on to her three children and six grandchildren. All of her children, Bill Menz, Jr. #203, Carolyn, Sue, and two of her grandchildren, Sherry Douty #8086 and Dyan (Douty) McMahan #8087, became 46ers.

Hoping to prepare Helen as much as possible I had emailed a list of questions to



Mary Colyer #29, Ruthie Prince King #43, the hermit Noah John Rondeau and Helen Colyer #42 in front at his Cold River camp.

Carolyn a few days before my arrival but on the drive over from Ithaca I worried I was the one unprepared. I called my son who interviews people for a living. "Have her look at some old photos," he advised. "That will stimulate her memory."

"Who is that man with the flowing beard?" I asked, pointing to a photo on a poster board Helen's daughters had propped up for my visit, a pictorial legacy of Helen's Adirondack adventures. Had Carolyn and Sue also called my son for advice? The old man in the photo was clearly enjoying the company of his three young visitors.

"That's Noah John," Helen said, referring to the legendary hermit, Rondeau, who lived for decades in the shadow of the Seward Range but welcomed travelers with a spare teepee, a cozy campfire and some fiddle music. "My sister, a friend, and I went to stay with him at his place on the Cold River

and later, when he was down in Albany at a sportsmen show, he came here to dinner."

Noah John? At this table where I now sat? It was hard to wrap my head around that.

"When we first saw him we hiked in from Corey's, three of us, and he accepted us, gave us a place to sleep. He'd cut his firewood into long poles and stacked them like a teepee. It was fine though it leaked a little. They weren't covered. The next day he was afraid 'the girls' would get lost so he went with us into the Seward's." She laughed heartily. "He huffed and he puffed. He was all worn out but he always could keep ahead of us. He was... Noah John... a great guy."

Rondeau occasionally left his hermitage and walked the seventeen miles out to Corey's for supplies. When the Great Hurricane of 1950 (prior to 1953, the U.S. Weather Bureau designated storms by a phonetic letter, like Able or Baker, not by female names) rendered his homestead unlivable he took up residence in Saranac Lake. Leverging his celebrity status, Rondeau accepted offers to participate in sportsmen's conventions in Albany, sponsored by the Department of Conservation.

"My husband had an argument with the Department," Helen

recalled. "They said Noah John couldn't come to our house but my husband promised we'd get him back to the show on time and they finally relented. At dinner he told us what it was like coming out of the woods during that hurricane with the trees falling all around him. He thought he was going to get killed. He had a good sense of humor and he loved the publicity. He wasn't the kind of hermit that didn't want people around."

The small dining room filled with laughter as the women reminisced about another trip to the Seward's when, years after the hermit had ceased to roam, they actually located Noah John's raft, tucked into a corner of Seward Pond. Helen's nephew, Jim Dittmar #465, boarded the raft, found a pole and steered around the pond much as the hermit had once done.

With great delight, Helen reported that Mary and her new husband, Ditt, (Adolph

“Ditt” Dittmar #31) chose to honeymoon in the High Peaks in 1943. They started out canoeing Long Lake, stashed their canoe in the woods and walked to Noah John’s to celebrate with him at his encampment.

“There weren’t many trails when we started in 1932,” Helen reminisced. “We did a lot of bushwhacking. We thought the Dixes were wonderful. We went in there many times and stayed in a lumber clearing. We had to bivouac in the Dixes one time and got bawled out by the Ausable Club for staying the night. They told us if we ever did that again they’d tow our cars away. They didn’t allow cars to stay overnight if you didn’t belong to the club.

“When the blowdown came (after the 1950 storm) it made it kind of hard but it didn’t stop us. Some places were horrible. I remember going up Redfield from Moss Pond and walking on the trees that were down. The woods were closed for a while. They couldn’t send rescue people in to get you out or fight a fire.”

I asked her if she remembered going up the Trap Dike. Her voice got huge and tremulous. “Yes!! We got part way up and went out on the face and decided it was too steep to go on and we didn’t want to call any rangers and have them say that ‘a bunch of kids are up there and we had to rescue them’ so we took our boots and socks off and went barefoot back to the Dike and went up the mountain til there was a far easier place to get off onto the slide. I never wanted to be rescued by Pete Fish,” she chortled, obviously referring to later times, after Pete had become the first backcountry ranger in 1975.

It was a bit befuddling for her to sort out which trips were taken when. The details of all those hikes, taken more than eighty years ago, could become a blur. “When you live so long,” she sighed, “it’s hard to remember everything. Mind’s like pudding sometimes.”

“You started hiking before the 46ers put canisters on the tops,” I asked. “How did you know when you were at the top?”

“There wasn’t anything higher,” she laughed. “We didn’t use compasses as much as other people did. We did use maps. Never got lost. If you looked at the map and you knew where the ridges were you could always get along. My brother-in-law, Ditt, put disks on some of the ones that were wooded. It had the name of the mountain and, I think, the height. People got very angry with him and he finally went and collected them all. My sister, Mary kept the disks for years.”

“Tell me about the equipment you used back then,” I said.

“We always wore Bean boots. Swore by them. The rest of the equipment we made ourselves—even our sleeping bags. The Albany Chapter (of the ADK) used to have parties and we’d buy parachute silk, dye it and tie it to wool batting; two layers of silk with wool in the middle. We had plain old Boy



Helen and Mary Colyer on Cascade, 1935. Poles may have been placed by surveyors to calculate elevation from a remote location.

Scout packs in the beginning. Our family had one pack basket also. We had tents a few times but it was too much trouble usually.”

“Any problems with bears, Helen?”

“One time I had Sue, my niece Betty Dittmar #563 and granddaughters Chris (Douty) Esposito and Sherry at Feldspar and a bear showed up and he pestered us all weekend. We were going to do Cliff the day we arrived but we couldn’t because we spent so much time trying to get the bag of food up into the tree. We weren’t baseball people; didn’t have very good luck. The siege lasted two days but the bear finally pawed through the rope and got our bag. He started off and we went after him with an alarm clock. He didn’t mind the alarm so we went back and got our cooking kit. Ruined it with our banging but he finally dropped the bag. We weren’t going to leave without retrieving that slimy thing. We grabbed it and ran as fast

as we could up to Lake Arnold. He didn’t follow us.

“During World War II it was harder to get up there. We had the bus drop us off by the end of the Loj road or someplace like that. One time, I think it may have been on Wright Peak, we forgot our flashlights and our friend, Charlie Hine #54, had a white jumpsuit on and he was the only one of us who had a light. He went ahead so we could see the way but he fell off a rock and disappeared. It was funny, watching Charlie’s white legs and then all of a sudden they disappeared. Hah! Fortunately, he didn’t get hurt.”

Helen was clearly enjoying the chance to reminisce. “We used to go in to Johns Brook Lodge every single year to open the place, get the mice out and the dishes cleaned up. There was a deer head hung over the fireplace and every spring there was a great big mouse nest in the antlers.

“My sister and I used to go by ourselves and we’d take a few people from the Chapter that were interested: Bess Little #30, Nell Plum #26 and Alice Waterhouse #16. Maybe six or eight of us. The first weekend we’d clean up and the second weekend we’d feed the trail clearing people.”

Sue reminded her mother of the trip they all took in the late ‘60s to the Swards when daylight ran out and, one by one, their flashlights kept quitting. At one point, Sue’s pack got hung up in a tree and she flipped upside down. Helen roared with laughter as she recalled that memorable hike. Uncle Ditt often had to call his office, Sue said, to tell his receptionist to reschedule dental appointments because he wouldn’t be making it in due to an overly long trip in the High Peaks. Helen’s face shone listening to her daughter recount those memories from nearly fifty years ago.

I wondered about Helen’s relationship with Grace Hudowalski #9, with whom she’d rarely hiked. Was it due to the difference in their ages, perhaps? Sue said that Helen and her husband, Bill, had been very close friends with “Auntie” Grace and “Uncle” Ed, often visiting with them at their camp, The Boulders, in Schroon Lake. “We used to go every year for the Fall Meeting as kids,” Sue said.

“The Boulder Punch,” Carolyn added. “Tell him about the punch.”

“Well, I could never drink anything,” Helen said. “My eyes would turn red, my face would get hot. Everyone else would sit there

drinking the Boulder Punch and I’d have to sit there and watch ‘em.”

“Remember the raccoons?” Carolyn asked her mother. “They had tame raccoons,” she explained to me.

“You kids would sleep out on the porch and the raccoons would come around sniffing your faces,” Helen laughed.

“The club was so small then, you could do that,” Carolyn said. “It was a wild time.”

“They had a big deck around the camp,” Helen said. “People slept all over. You had to be careful not to step on somebody.”

Though they hadn’t shared many days in the mountains together, Helen and Grace maintained a treasured annual ritual. Every February they would get together with the forms all the newly-minted 46ers had mailed in to the Historian’s Office and, together, they would assign the climbers their numbers, cross-referencing to make sure they were accurately done. “We probably spent two days each year doing that,” Helen said. “And every Christmas Eve we used to bring the kids over to Grace and Ed’s house on Cardinal Avenue in Albany. They didn’t have kids of their own and they loved to see ours.

“Many of my most vivid memories of hikes in the High Peaks were on days that didn’t go as planned,” I said. “Was that the case for you?”

Helen agreed. “I recall a hike in the Santanonis with Sue, my nieces Brooke Dittmar #561 and Betty, Mary and Ditt. We were coming down Panther Brook, bushwhacking in the dark, when I fell into a spruce trap or something, suspended off the ground by my pack. ‘OK, time to stop,’ Ditt said, deciding that it was too dangerous to continue, so we slept there in the brook on a tiny island made of roots, moss and debris.

“Ditt wanted to follow the rules for everything,” Helen said. “I recall that when we reached a hill, he insisted we take a compass bearing which would take us up and over it. If we’d just gone around the hill we would have hit an easy place and could have saved a lot of hard work. He’d trudge on ahead and then wait for us and we’d know we were getting close by the tobacco smoke.”

“Then we’d catch up with him and he’d take off. No rest for us,” Sue said.

“Remember, mom, when you and Uncle Ditt took me on my first hike, up Cascade/

Porter?” Carolyn asked. “You decided we should come down directly to the Cascade Lakes.” Helen roared. “Every tree came out at the roots as we came down that waterfall. My first hike, that’s where you take me?” Carolyn teased. “Then there was the time one of my cousins was thirsty and I guess we were out of water, so they took all the little kids bushwhacking down the brook between Giant and Rocky Peak Ridge. Have you ever been down that one?” Carolyn asked me.

“I’ve gone up that way,” I said, recalling a memorable 46er finishing trip for my friend Jane Rosenbloom #2647. Not wanting to let her complete the 46 too easily, we made her lead up that brook which leaves Route 73 just southeast of the ridge trail to Giant,



Mary Dittmar and Helen Menz. Photo credit: Elizabeth Dittmar Green

hoping she was smart enough to avoid the cliffs below the Giant/Rocky Peak Ridge col. Meeting us on top were caterers from South Meadow Farm Lodge, who had climbed over Giant, and, dressed now in bow ties and bright suspenders, laid out a vast array of gourmet treats and bottles of champagne on the broad summit of Rocky Peak Ridge. A photographer from Adirondack Life happened to be there at the same time. He took advantage of his good fortune to partake of our feast and capture the unlikely scene.

“There was only one trip where someone got hurt,” Helen remembered. “We were on a steep rocky section between Armstrong and Upper Wolf Jaw when one of the group, Dorothy Graton, fell and broke her collarbone and wrist.” Helen and one of her granddaughters, Chris Douty, age ten, stayed with Dorothy while Chris’ younger sister, eight-year-old Sherry, and Helen’s daughter, Sue, went over Upper Wolf Jaw and then down to the ranger’s cabin at Johns Brook

Lodge. “We sat out all night with her waiting for help,” Helen said.

A ranger near JBL, “radioed other rangers in the area and got a couple of trail clearing volunteers to help. He also found a medic who happened to be staying in one of the lean-tos to come up to stabilize her,” Sue explained. “The rescue crew realized that where we were was too steep to litter her down safely so they cut a new trail down between Armstrong and Upper Wolf Jaw.”

“They couldn’t believe we all had flashlights,” said Helen. “I told them we wouldn’t go off the porch without lights. Hah! I remember the sight of them carrying her down a long rock ledge looked like a picture from Egypt, with the stretcher and a lantern in the front and a lantern in the back. We got down around eight the next morning.”

“In the meantime, Sherry and I made breakfast at JBL for the ADK trail clearing crew, about 25 of them,” Sue said. “As the trail crew was heading out, my mom and Chris returned and went straight to bed!”

We had been talking for a couple of hours and it was clear Helen was growing weary while still enjoying sharing her life’s passion. One of the impressions I took away from that afternoon was how much Helen loved to laugh. She seemed to squeeze every last ounce of pleasure from her experiences in the mountains; the Adirondacks had indelibly defined her.

“I had such a good time and there’s so much I wish I could do again. It gives you such a feeling of being uplifted. You get up on top of a mountain and you see the whole world, all the places you’ve been. I wish I’d had a chance to do more, like climb up the backside of Avalanche Mountain. But I was so busy on the big ones I didn’t get the time to do some of the smaller ones.”

Helen Colyer Menz glanced at the poster board filled with photos. She focused on a picture of herself, taken a few weeks earlier near the top of Whiteface. Sue and Carolyn, along with Sue’s daughters, Kelly and Kristy, had driven Helen up the Memorial Highway the day after the 46er Fall Meeting in October. From her perch on a rock wall by the parking area Helen could see nearly to Montreal. The view encompassed so many of the places that had shaped her as a woman. “It was a perfect day,” she said, dabbing her eye with a tissue. “A perfect day.” ■