

A visit with pioneer Ruby Horwood, AMC's first woman president

By Joan Aichele

When I am out on an AMC activity and meet other members of our chapter, I sometimes ask where they live.

This is a two-fold question. It breaks the ice, and it helps me, as chapter membership chair, to understand where some of our more active members reside.

One day while I was hiking with the Wednesday hikers, I asked this question of Cyrille White, an AMC member since 1966 but relatively new to our DV Chapter. She told me she had lived in Maine and has relocated a few times over the years, and was now living at Foulkeways in Gywnedd, PA.

I commented that we had a few other AMC members living at Foulkeways. Our discussion led to the name Ruby Horwood. I was familiar with Ruby's name but knew nothing of her past history with AMC. Cyrille mentioned that Ruby was the first female president of the AMC Board. (That was before the title changes a few years back. Today the president would be the Chair of the Board.) I was quite excited to learn about Ruby and her history with AMC. I commented that it would be wonderful to meet her.

Cyrille arranged a meeting with Ruby for me and two other long-time dedicated DV Chapter volunteers, Jane Shepard and Lennie Steinmetz, who both knew Ruby very well. We were all able to get together in Ruby's apartment and spent a wonderful afternoon reminiscing about AMC and Ruby's various hiking experiences. I must admit I was in awe of the company I found myself in. Between Ruby, Jane and Lennie there is a combined 144 years of dedication and commitment to AMC!

Ruby was delightful to talk with. She had a sparkle in her eyes, a quick wit and a willingness to share her memories. Her answers were short but to the point.

When asked how she got started hiking, she replied, "I just did."

She commented that she had a sister who would not even walk one mile. When asked where she had hiked, she pulled out a list of the many countries and regions she had visited: England, New Zealand, the Dolomites in Italy, Iceland, Scandinavia and Switzerland — her favorite place to hike, she had been there 12 times. Closer to home, she hiked in Colorado, at Mt. Rainer and the Grand Canyon just to name a few. Then she showed us a sash that a friend had made for her door with many patches she had acquired from the areas she had hiked.

Ruby and Jane had traveled together on some of these hikes. They shared laughs about some of their experiences such as sharing a tent at August Camp, and going on a backpacking trip to Phantom Ranch in the Grand Canyon. They were to hike up to the North Rim but there was too much snow, so they had to turn around and hike out the way they came in.

As we read aloud Ruby's list of the countries she had visited, she commented "I got around and spent a lot of money."

She went on numerous AMC Major Excursions. She showed us a picture of herself in Iceland crossing a stream with her pant legs rolled up and her hiking boots hanging from her neck. No taking the easy route for this strong hiker!

Talking about the Highland Center led to a discussion about the AMC huts. When I asked her if she had hiked up to the huts, her reply was. "I've done the huts, I've done the huts," and laughed. "I've done them quite often. They are some lovely spots."

Madison was one of her favorites.

When asked how she became the first female president of the AMC board in 1975, she replied, "Three or four people asked me if I would do it, so I went off for a couple of hours, came back and agreed to do it."

And do it she did. She was involved with the acquisition of the two additional townhouses at Joy St. shortly after she became president. "They really needed the space. There wasn't much room,"

She said she tried to visit all the chapters over the course of a year, and then had to start all over again.

And some things never change. She commented that "all the groups have a lot of meetings".

There were a couple of big projects on the agenda during her tenure. The first was protecting Franconia Notch in the White Mountains from the proposed widening of I-93 to a four lane superhighway.

The second was a major issue closer to home, fighting the proposed Tocks Island Dam in the Delaware Water Gap. Many of us who now recreate in this beautiful landscape are extremely thankful to Ruby and the others who fought to protect this area so that we and future generations have a place to hike, paddle and explore. The area is now known as the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, a place known for its history, natural beauty and abundant wildlife. A place where one can go to renew their spirit.

During Ruby's time as president she was living in Rhode Island, but then moved to Pennsylvania. She said she would catch the 7 PM flight to Boston every Friday evening, work all weekend and then fly home on Sunday evening. She truly was a dedicated AMC volunteer.

She proudly showed us the wooden gavel that was presented to her for her two years of service as president. It had a brass plate engraved with her name and the years she served: 1974-1975.

Ruby also served on the DV Chapter Executive Committee. It was a time when the DV Chapter was still relatively new and they were working hard to get the chapter going. She had no idea how big it would become. She was not sure, but thought she had probably served in every chair position on the DV Executive Committee at one time or another.

Ruby commented that she still is very interested in what is going on in AMC and enjoys keeping up with it. She was aware of AMC's efforts in Maine as well as in trying to get more programs going for children.

To me, Ruby is AMC. She represents what AMC is all about. She had and still has a strong conviction, dedication and willingness to volunteer. And she loved to enjoy the great outdoors and traveling.

AMC was founded in 1876 and is still going strong 137 years later because of dedicated volunteers like Ruby stepping up whenever and wherever needed. She truly is an inspiration to those who follow in her footsteps. Thank you Ruby!

