

Athol Daily News

Vol. CCCIX No. 11 75¢

Single Copy \$3.30

Per Week Delivered By Carrier

Athol, Mass., Weekend, July 14-15, 2012

atholdailynews.com

12 Pages

Athol author traces the last journey of Thoreau

Book launch Tuesday in Athol

By KATHY CHAISSON
ADN Staff Writer

ATHOL — Corinne H. Smith of Athol has always loved to travel, but it was a 1981 National Geographic magazine article that would send her on a most unexpected journey.

Smith will be celebrating the launch of her new book, *Westward I Go Free: Tracing Thoreau's Last Journey*, about a rarely documented time in the life of 19th century naturalist, lecturer and author, Henry David Thoreau. Bruce's Brower in Athol will

Author Page 8



Corinne H. Smith

be hosting the launch on Tuesday, July 17th at 6:30 p.m. Smith will read excerpts from her book and answer questions. Signed copies will be available for purchase.

A Pennsylvania native and former Athol librarian, Smith became "hooked on Henry," after reading his *Civil Disobedience* in tenth grade. As a senior, she read Thoreau's best known work, *Walden*, about the two years he lived in Walden Woods in a small, sparsely furnished cabin one mile from the center of Concord, Massachusetts. Surviving and earning a living off the land, Thoreau's separation from civilization deepened his appreciation of nature.

In 1997 while living in northern Illinois, a friend at a book discussion group showed Smith an old National Geographic magazine article about a two month trip that Thoreau and a companion took in 1861. A two-page mapped route traced their journey by train and steamboat from Massachusetts to Minnesota and back.

It was the first time Smith had ever heard of this part of Thoreau's normally well-documented travels and endeavors. (Five years earlier, Thoreau traveled by train to Brattleboro passing through Athol, Orange, and Erving, observing bits of nature in the Connecticut River Valley that he didn't see in Concord.)

It was also to be Thoreau's final excursion before his death nine months later.

Smith, "mesmerized" by this new information, realized that the map's path circling the Midwest passed right through where she and the book group were sitting. This was one of several coincidences that occurred during this book project. While preparing for this very meeting, Smith had read Thoreau's essay "Walking" for the first time and it left a strong impact on her. She takes her book's title from part of it:

"In short, all good things are wild and free... Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free."

Thoreau was referring to his rural Concord home west of the city of Boston.

Prior to this trip, Thoreau had been diagnosed with consumption, the most rampant killer of the day. He'd already lost family members to the illness. It wasn't known then to be contagious. Doctors thought it to be a syndrome caused by being indoors too much and prescribed a bland diet, vigorous exercise and for men only, travel to other climates. By the time Thoreau's doctor told him of these options, Ft. Sumter had been fired upon - the Civil War had begun. Smith surmises that in spite of being an abolitionist, Thoreau would not have traveled to the South had he not been sick. He chose Minnesota because New Englanders sent "glowing" reports to the newspapers back home of how the brisk air there helped clear them up.

A travel companion was also required. Friend Ralph Waldo Emerson provided Thoreau with a list of contacts and it was Horace Mann, Jr., the son of education reformer and politician Horace Mann who joined Thoreau on his journey. Thoreau knew Mann Jr. already because, according to Smith, "he was constantly bringing dead animals to Henry to identify."

Smith believes he also used the doctor's advice as his chance to observe Native American culture and the region's native plants and animals.

Smith began to research where in Illinois Thoreau and Mann would have passed through. She also wanted to find out if the train tracks still existed. General biographies and a transcription from a Thoreau field notebook were not helpful.

The husband of a naturalist friend of Smith's recalled an article he'd read years before about Thoreau's trip out west. He located the piece by Edmund A. Schofield called "John Muir's Yankee Friends and Mentors: The New England Connection." Schofield had traced the entire journey, including the pair's departure from Chicago and the name of the railroad company. Smith located the same tracks using old atlases and new maps. She also researched old train schedules at Harvard University's Baker Library

and was able to confirm that the train tables mentioned in Mann's letters matched the library's records.

Smith was surprised to discover that she had crossed over those very tracks four times a day during her commute to work. Portions of the tracks have since become automobile freight lines while others were abandoned.

Smith moved to Massachusetts and in 2003 at a librarian's workshop she was discussing Thoreau with a fellow librarian when he mentioned the name Ed Schofield, the writer of the John Muir article. Schofield was working at the Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston, MA. Smith was surprised again when she learned that he was living nearby in Worcester. It was Schofield who had provided the clues to Thoreau's last journey. After gathering nearly a year's worth of courage, she contacted the Thoreau scholar and they spent many hours talking by phone and in person.

Smith, at Schofield's suggestion, decided to follow and write about Thoreau's entire journey west because it hadn't been done before. She also needed to fill in the gaps that Thoreau and Mann left out of their journals and letters home. The trip would take her through ten states and Ontario.

Smith obtained a micro-filmed copy of Thoreau's travel journal, a 100-page notebook filled with brief but precise details of the trip and inventories of plants he'd collected along the way. According to Smith, he botanized mostly from train windows as they rode by and treated the trip as a scientific excursion. A list of items he brought along included a spy glass, plant press for flattening specimens, at least one botanic manual, insect boxes, a compass, and a microscope. Twice he wrote down his purchase of cough syrup and throat lozenges.

Armed with a lifetime of "Thoreauvian" knowledge and a background in research, Smith wrote her book from the viewpoint of both historian and participant. Included is a travelogue of "when you go" directions and descriptions. Smith recruited local readers to go through her manuscript and dedicates the book to Ed Schofield who died in 2010.

Smith found a publisher in Green Frigate Books and was a part of the proofing process. "Just making a couple of decisions on my part have been beneficial and almost magical at times."

The road to publication, as Smith discovered and as most writers experience, is not a short one: "Being a librarian for more than thirty years, it was interesting for me to see how excruciating the process is for every published writer. Every one of those books out there has a story that goes beyond its pages."

Westward I Go Free: Tracing Thoreau's Last Journey will be available for purchase locally, through amazon.com and in Kindle and Nook format.