

The Owen Demeritt Place

A secluded, most would say isolated, farm in Ketchum next to the Bull Branch of Sunday River that was home to the family of a well known guide and snowshoe maker

Owen Demeritt was a name that had achieved folklore status in the Sunday River and Bethel area during the first half of the Twentieth Century. The best known and still valuable artifacts associated with his guiding and craftsmanship are snowshoes. He engraved his name into the frame of the snowshoe and for those in the know, these snowshoes are collectors' items. My mother had a pair of snowshoes made by him and they are still in good condition.

Owen Demeritt was born January 23, 1866; his parents were Charles H. and Amanda F. Demeritt. He married Lucy I Barker who was born November 29, 1877; she died May 11, 1941. Mr. Demeritt died August 2, 1952. All except Charles H Demeritt are buried in the Mt. Will Cemetery in Bethel. In 1896, Owen Demeritt was engineer at the Tibbett's spool mill in Locke's Mills.

Owen's father, Charles, owned the Riley property in 1905 when it was surveyed, a total of 521 acres (Sunday River Sketches).

During the first several decades of the 20th Century, Owen and Lucy Demeritt were a well known party in the "social network" of the Sunday River valley residents. They had four daughters, but lost one to scarlet fever and a second daughter suffered deafness from the same disease. They lived on a 19th Century valley farm situated within a cup-shaped valley bordered on the west by Bull Branch. Their home was in a place called Ketchum, legally known as Riley Plantation.

It is quite likely that the parties Mr. Demeritt guided boarded with the family at their farm in Ketchum. From Sunday River news: November 1917, Owen Demeritt was a lucky hunter last week having got a large bear. Also, Mr. and Mrs. Owen Demeritt and family attended a reception at Newry Corner for a Mr. and Mrs. (name not readable). The next month a news item reported that Eugene Thurlow (another legendary Sunday River figure) had finished working for Owen Demeritt and had gone to the lakes.

In her family history for the month of July 1920 Daisy Crosby (my grandmother) wrote as the last line in a short account of family's activities for that month, "You (my grandfather) and eight others bought the Demeritt place." In "Sunday River Sketches" Martha Fifield Wilkins wrote of the Demeritt place: the home of Owen Demeritt was eventually used as a Club House for a sporting syndicate. (My grandfather would have appreciated that comment.)

I have never dug into details behind that note enough to find out who the eight others were. But the "Demeritt Place" has belonged to members of the Morrison family from Concord, Massachusetts for many decades. Therefore, I assume that one of the unknown eight was a Morrison.

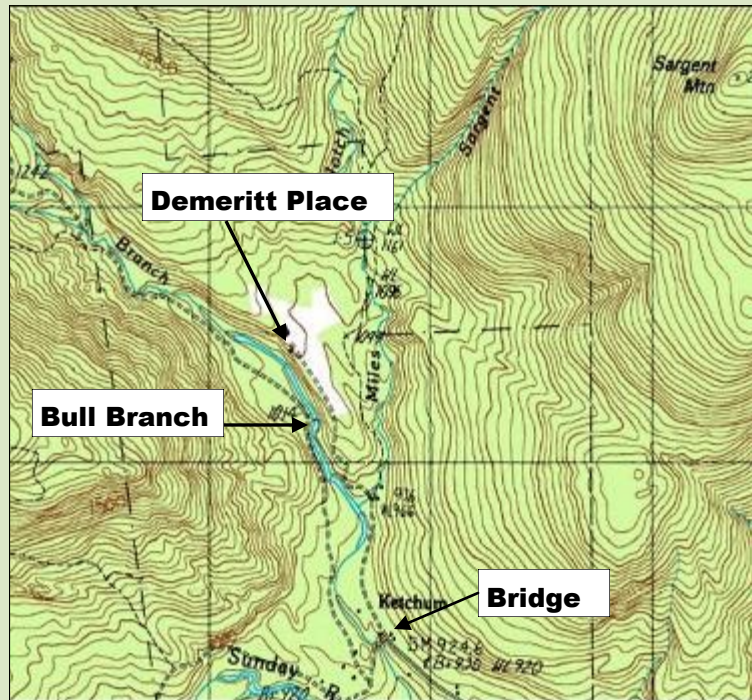
An entry in Daisy Crosby's family history for October 1920 reads, "Mr. Graham, you and I went

to Bethel in the Hup [mobile]. Spent the night at Morrison's Camp and nearly froze."

Earlier when the Crosby family was spending summer vacations at the Locke Farm on the Sunday River Road, Ketchum and the Demeritt place, were traditional picnic outing destinations for boarders staying at Miss Locke's.

Ruth Crosby had this to say about the Demeritts when she wrote "I Was a Summer Boarder", her memoir of summers spent at the Locke Farm on Sunday River.

From the Locke Farm those boarders going on the picnic rode in a horse drawn mountain wagon along the Sunday River Road through the covered bridge, past the Letter S curve and on into Ketchum, actually Riley Plantation. After descending the steep hill to arrive at a "shaky plank bridge" over the Bull Branch, travelers going to the Demeritt place would continue up a the woods road to another steep hill which led to the farm. Only the driver stayed in the wagon when these steep sections of road were encountered. The farm itself was located at the top of this climb in a level plateau surrounded by steep hills.



Map: After crossing from Newry into Riley Plantation (Ketchum) one went down hill and continued straight, by passing the bridge, then traveled for nearly a mile up the farm road to the Demeritt place.



Homestead of first Charles and then C. Owen Demeritt and family. Buildings in the photograph are facing East. Barely visible in the left of the photo is the log cabin school house built by Owen Demeritt. Martha Fifield Wilkins states in her chronicle, Sunday River Sketches, that O. Isreal B. Fifield (1787-1863) constructed the buildings. This photograph shows the buildings as they looked around 1920 or earlier.

The association between the Demeritt family and the Locke Farm was through Gertrude Demeritt, Owen's sister; she was the chief cook for Ellen Locke at the Locke Mountain House. The elder Demeritt family lived in a house at Swan's Corner, only a short walk to the Locke Farm homestead.



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The Demeritt Log Cabin School House built by Owen Demeritt. Ruth Crosby wrote that since Ketchum (Riley) was not part of any town the state supplied a teacher for the Demeritt children, the Littlehales, and any others nearby. The teacher boarded with the Demeritts and kept school in the log cabin. The cabin also had bunks in which guests could be put up for over night. A few years after the Locke Farm closed in 1913 Ruth Crosby and her mother, Daisy Crosby, spent a week in the cabin.

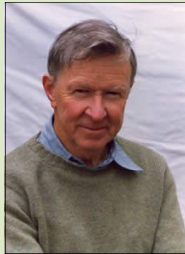
The August 25, 1921 Sunday River news reported that R. M. (Rob) Bean has moved to the Owen Demeritt place. The Bean family lived in the log cabin. One of the Bean daughters who later was a Bethel school teacher, Frances Bean Gunther, told stories of living there and of some of their exploring adventures.

Right, photo of Demeritt family and others (?); the people in the picture were not identified. It was taken at the Demeritt home and is part of the same collection as the other photos.



January 11, 1979, Sunday River news in the Citizen: Mr. and Mrs. Alva Morrison and most of their children are at the Morrison Place in Ketchum and at ski areas around here.

Note: there were two Alva Morrison's whose name was recently connected to their family retreat in Ketchum. The Alva Morrison I knew best passed away in September 2006 and is probably the one mentioned in Mrs. Fleet's news. Alva Morrison was a



railfan. In the 1970's he became well known for his enterprise called Sunday River Productions. He began converting his movies of steam trains into video tapes and went into that business to the extent that he was known for the great lengths he would go to in order to film one of a kind shots of steam trains in operation. He was written up in Trains magazine. During the 1990's Kathy and I went to a number of the winter New England Model Railroad shows in West Springfield, Mass. Alva Morrison was always there running his Sunday



This is the last of the Demeritt place photo collection. The lady in the photo maybe Mrs. Lucy Barker Demeritt.



Photo above of the now Morrison Place was taken in 1934. Buildings have been refurbished and painted. This photo is from the Martha Fifield Wilkins collection and was printed in the Sunday River Sketches. The book and photos are Bethel Historical Society property.

River Productions booth.

The second Alva Morrison was a younger member of the same Massachusetts family; he came to live full time circa 1980 at the Morrison Place where stayed in the log cabin. His specialty was playing the fiddle. Then the state came up with a proposal to dump low level radioactive waste in Riley. Alva Morrison put on a necktie and joined the campaign against the pro-



Above: Google Earth Map showing the Demeritt place (yellow pin) in relation to other key points in the valley.

posal which led him into a second campaign to close Maine Yankee Nuclear Power Plant in Wiscasset. We don't know if he ever returned to Ketchum. (more to be added later)

Photo of Alva Morrison is from the current Sunday River Productions Web site.

Photos of the Demerit family homestead and people are from a Ruth Crosby photo album now property of Bethel Historical Society.