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Veteran Political reporter Shirley Elder Lyons, working with Elizabeth MacGregor Bates, has produced a book acclaimed as “fascinating” and a “great read.” It’s called *Over the Hill Hikers*, and is published by Peter E. Randall Publisher of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Lyons, who lives in Portsmouth, is the writer; Bates, who lives in Sandwich, New Hampshire, is the doer. Lib – as she is known far and wide – has climbed around New Hampshire’s White Mountains for 80 years or so. But she didn’t take charge of anyone but members of her own family until she retired to Sandwich. There, she found a group of retirees interested in doing something, maybe hiking.

The book chronicles the ups and downs (literally) of those retirees, who became a very cohesive bunch of happy hikers under Lib’s instinctive use of casual leadership. Lew Feldstein, former president of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, describes the book as a living example of the growth of “social capital” in one small town in the middle of New England.

In *Over the Hill Hikers*, Journalist Lyons, who covered the U.S. Congress for the Washington Star and New Hampshire politics for the Boston Globe’s NH section, tells the story of how the hiking group grew and grew and grew. Lib was a rare creature who actually enjoyed planning and organizing as much as she enjoyed hiking. She was determined to make hiking fun as well as satisfying for her new recruits.

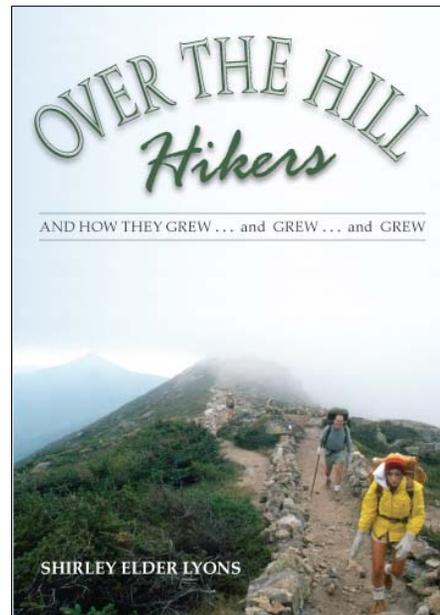
It worked. The hikers just hiked, every Tuesday, and built a unique community along the way.

“I just started doing these things,” she said at one Over the Hill Hikers get-together, “and just kept on for 16 years since no one threw me out. For the first 12 years we didn’t even have dues or a treasurer.” What she had was a little tin box in her kitchen where she deposited occasional contributions for postage.

Lib was never elected, nor given any official title. One hiker dubbed her the “den mother,” and that seemed to sum up her style of hands-off leadership. One key to her success was in making others think they had thought up some new and popular project.

She loved New Hampshire’s mountains, and had hiked all over the place by the time she went off to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. Her father, a Boston teacher known as “Red Mac,” led the way as the first hutmaster for the Appalachian Mountain Club. Hiking was in their blood. It was a natural step years later for Lib to retire to Sandwich, take over a disparate bunch of would-be hikers, and lead them into the hills.

Although Lib stepped aside in the late 1990s, the hiking group has continued to function under new leaders and with new members. There is a website with information about the book and the group at www.overthehillhikersbook.com.



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