

DAVE SUTTER: OCTOGENARIAN AND IMPRESARIO EXTRAORDINAIRE



It is a winter day – the sky is blue, the air is crisp, the wind is nil. As typical for an AMC hike led by the *Master of Harriman*, Dave Sutter, a crowd of participants gathers for the trek up Dunderberg mountain.

Our ascent begins steep, so our first stop to remove a layer of winter garb is at an abandoned scenic railway tunnel constructed of exquisitely honed granite blocks. Dave steady leads the score of hikers – which includes his wife Naomi and son John – up the Timp Torne Trail. The group begins to stretch out as heart rates increase, then breathing quickens, and finally a few begin to break a sweat. Being a particularly mild day, wearing only a suit jacket and bearing no backpack, I am among the fortunate few to be neither breathing hard nor sweating. After a *separation* which Dave provides as much for relief to catch one's breath as for relieving oneself, he veers onto the Ramapo-Dunderberg Trail which he informs us was built in 1920 is the oldest trail in Harriman State Park, at 23 miles and 6,000 elevation gain is one of the longest, and is heralded as the most scenic. Not content to adhere to this famed route, Dave takes us on the abandoned Miles Trail and tells us about the tribute bench that he and friends built as memorial to that Harriman Park legend – William Miles. On this trail, at a particularly scenic site overlooking Iona Island, I gather the group to tell a story about Dave Sutter.



“Why are we here today?” I rhetorically begin. “A few years ago I was hiking with an AMC group very much like this one, on a day very much like today, led by this same leader – Dave Sutter. At lunch, Dave gathered the group and inquired, ‘How many octogenarians are here today?’ When we counted, there were five – which says very much about the health and hardiness of AMC members. Dave Sutter

is the only fellow who calls me *Skippy*. As we renewed our hike after lunch, Dave turned to me and asked, ‘Skippy, would you like to know the secret of life?’ I am always open to the secret of life, so of course I said yes. Dave continued, ‘When the sky is blue, be outdoors. It doesn’t matter if you are hiking, or biking, or skiing, or sailing. If the sky is blue, be outdoors.’” Arms to the sky, I ask our group, “What kind of sky do we have today?” “Blue” they reply in unison. I add, “This is what I now call a *Dave Sutter sky*.” With a pause I conclude, “We are here.”

Dave continues along a connection of woods roads and the beds of the abandoned scenic railway. Naomi herself seems philosophical as well, for as we walk talking about the holocaust, the history of Germany, and the World War, Naomi pauses, reflects, and summarizes, “All that is important in life is to go out and have some fun and try not to hurt anybody.”

If there is a match made in heaven – perhaps too, in Harriman – it is Dave and Naomi Sutter: they are intellectual equals, outdoors partners, and share an intimate love even to the extent of jealousy. Hiking with them last year on Long Mountain, there is a narrow lemon squeeze with a large step-up at the end at which point many people need a boost to negotiate it. With Dave at the lead and already past the crux, and with Naomi somewhere in the middle of the group yet to navigate the hurdle, Dave realizes the situation and yells back to everyone, “Nobody touch my wife’s butt!” (Her grandson immediately behind Naomi evidently did not hear and nonetheless gave his grandmother a boost on her caboose.)

Dave’s next discovery is the *escalator* which we climb to ascend the escarpment where he brings us to a panoramic place for lunch. There I tell the captive group, “And now a story about Naomi Sutter.” “Dave,” I begin, “I have a secret to tell you.” The group becomes attentive. I continue, “I am in love with your wife.” All goes quiet. Dave’s eyes widen... the man of many words is speechless. In that silence I begin my story. “At an AMC leader’s party a few years ago, I happened to wear a suit jacket, at which Naomi complimented my finer attire.” “I remember that” interjects Naomi, “at Susan Steingold’s house.” “Her exact words were:” I continued, ‘I always appreciate a dapper man.’ And from that time onward, whenever I am in the company of Naomi Sutter, I am in dapper dress.” Dave recovers and with his commanding voice intones, “I have a secret about Skippy: he is deaf in his left ear and doesn’t hear so well.” And with a touché tone in his voice, Dave gloats, “Naomi did not say ‘I like a dapper man’, she said ‘I like a DAFFY man!’” Without pause and before anyone can muster a chuckle, the witty Naomi deadpans, “I should know, I’m married to one.” At which point the entire group bursts out in laughter.

The afternoon follows with obscure trails, Dave’s famed Harriman lore, his secret stash, and concludes with a tailgate party compliments of Manfred.

Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery. On Sunday, December 9, I am offering a special tribute hike of Dunderberg in Dave Sutter fashion. Not only as flattery, and not even just as a tribute, but as an expression of affection for a man that I admire and love.