

Man Returns After 42 Years to Find Home Empty;
Wife Who Lighted Window Every Night, Dead

THE BOSTON HERALD, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1933

Wanderer Hears Story of Devotion in N.H. Mountain Home

(Special Dispatch to The Herald)

ALBANY, N.H., Sept. 28—Cuba, Panama and youth behind him, Thomas Alden Colbath stood before a deserted house high up in the birch clad hills of the Passaconaway valley today for the first time in 42 years and heard a story that concerned a wife now dead and a light that each night shone in the darkness surrounding the mountain cabin. The old man, now slightly deaf, knew the first part of the story which began when he was a young man. It was on a fall day in 1891 and he stood before the cabin and told his wife, before swinging down the hillside, that he would be back in a “a little while.” But today he shook his head again and again as Ben Swinton, a neighbor, told him the remainder of the story, of how, while he was wandering in California, in Cuba, and half way around the world, and with never a thought of his wife, she always expected his return, and each night until her death three years ago placed a light in the window of her lonely mountain home.

Of how she lived alone, of how she refused to leave the cabin even at the height of the deadliest winter, of how people said she was crazy and told her that her husband must be dead.

“But she always put the lamp in the window no matter what they said,” Ben Swinton told him

The wife, who was Ruth Priscilla Colbath, died at the age of 81 three years ago. She died in the house she was born, which nestled between Mt. Passaconaway and Mt. Chocorua in the White Mountains, and which was built by her grandfather in 1800. She was known as the “hermit woman” and as the years passed and she still refused to leave her home and she had but one friend and that was Ben Swinton, who lived two miles away. Some ten years ago her story became known and at long spaced intervals there would be feature stories concerning the aging woman. Born in 1849 and never away from her White Mountain home she liked to tell of the old days when “Uncle Steve” Ballard, mighty hunter, roamed the mountains performing gargantuan feats of valor and skill “Uncle Steve” died in 1869 at the age of 99 and Mrs. Colbath had known him when she was girl.

She was a pleasant-faced old woman and the keynote of her character was a charming simplicity. Yet she could be dignified too, and when the over-curious asked her about the lamp which each night shone from her window she would refuse to discuss the subject.

TO LIVE IN A CABIN

In the last years of her life she was virtually an invalid. Swinton twice each day walked the two miles between his home and that of Mrs. Colbath and did the chores for her.

Three years ago she became seriously ill. Disregarding her wishes, Swinton had her taken to the hospital at North Conway, Where she died.

Her husband, who justified her faith as to returning a bit too late, said that he would live in the cabin again if its owners would permit him to. He was a bit vague about he had left or where he had gone, mentioning, Cuba, Panama and California. His wife's estate, to which he would have been the legal heir was divided between other relatives in the belief that he was dead.